

































## THE TEMPTER

Behind the red curtains of the narrow bookshop the activities are sinister and illegal, but those who—through their own or through society's sickness—are drawn within achieve release and recapture their own innocence. Samson, the vain and enigmatic bookseller, leads them into conduct which is perilous in both spiritual and social terms, but his nature is recognized ultimately to contain 'a strong element of the redeemer'. Among those most powerfully influenced are the austere young solipsist, Julius; Bertie, sensual and loyal; Louise, happily married, yet incomplete; and Bateman and Veronica, who achieve a poignant love under the most unpropitious circumstances.

*By the same Author*



**RUSSIAN ROULETTE  
THE DELINQUENTS**

# THE TEMPTER

*By*

Anthony Bloomfield

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‘Cock’s body! You were right to laugh at his ruthless tears—aside from the fact that whoever has, by nature, dealings with the tempter is always at variance with the feelings of people, always tempted to laugh when they weep, and weep when they laugh.’

THOMAS MANN—*Doctor Faustus*  
(Translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter)

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Messrs Secker and Warburg for permission to quote from their translation of *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann.



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## PART ONE

### *Chapter 1*

FOR a minute or two Bateman stood on the pavement looking into the window; then he pushed open the door and went in.

There were some half-dozen people in the shop, all men, all to be seen only from the rear or in profile as they peered at the covers of the books on the shelves or held single books in their hands, close to their bodies, their chins on their chests.

The man whom Bateman knew as Samson (or Samuels) was at the far end of the shop, standing before thick plum-coloured curtains and sorting a pile of books on a table.

Just within the door was a rack containing paper-backs with garish and naïve covers. Bateman paused there a moment, glancing casually, and then moved further within.

He was impressed by the quiet: no one was talking, and only the slithered footstep as one of the customers moved along the shelves or the thin clap of several pages in a skimmed book falling together contained the quality of personal and meaningful noise imposed upon the ubiquitous impersonal throbbing of the city's traffic.

At random, Bateman took a volume from a shelf of newly published novels, and he felt a kind of instinctive and austere satisfaction in the smell of the paper's freshness. He let his eyes read the information on the dust-cover. One of the customers walked behind him and left the shop, the opening of the door admitting a clamour which seemed to subsist for a little while even after the door had closed again.

He replaced the novel and took a few paces along the shelves, passing behind a man whose breathing contained a harsh bronchial note. Again he selected a book—selected, for there must have been an element of choice which led his hand to one particular spine—but even when

he was holding it open in front of him, head bird-bent like the others, he was quite unaware of the book's nature and contents.

Bateman knew the shop to form an L-shape: a narrow room, perhaps thirty feet long, with at the inner end, by the table and the heavy curtains, a short base to the L, a kind of annex, concealed by the arrangement of the shelves.

Another customer passed behind Bateman, walking towards the table, and then for the first time since he had entered the shop there came the sound of speech, but without disturbing—rather blending into—the essential quiet.

Samson (or Samuels) had a low, even voice, a voice without idiosyncrasies. He conducted the sale with a brisk and neutral courtesy.

As the customer walked away, Bateman, replacing the second book, stepped round the corner into the annex. There was no one else there.

In the main part of the shop the daylight through the windows had filtered and absorbed the yellow of the artificial light, but no daylight reached here, and so by those few steps Bateman had entered an entirely different atmosphere, almost nocturnal, enclosed and secretive. Moreover, the arrangement of the shelves was such that within the furthest corner of the annex—a tip to the base of the L, as it were—there was a small space concealed even from the viewpoint of the table.

For the first time since he had entered the shop Bateman acted unthinkingly: possibly in response to an irresistible demand of his own nature, he went straight to this concealed corner.

He felt immediately that he had made a mistake. He peered unnecessarily closely at the books in front of him for an instant and then stepped backwards and a little to one side, glancing up and blinking, giving an impression in miniature of a man who has lost his way.

Samson (or Samuels) was no longer behind the table, a matter of mere seconds having cloaked his disappearance.

Bateman bent again to the books. Here, they were of a different kind: more worn and, in the main, more sober in their outward appearance, scorning obvious allurements.

Bateman's attitude towards the books was also different: whereas, previously, he had chosen haphazardly, he was now seeking a volume, or type of volume, which would serve a particular and calculated aim.

In making his choice, he weighed one title against another, but the titles proved an insufficient guide. He had to glance—now wholly concentrated—at four or five before he found one which he thought would suit his purpose.

Still with his back towards the table—but not absolutely, so that, for instance, he was aware of a brief movement of the curtains—he held his selected book up high, on a level with his eyes, head thrown back now, as if he were trying to avoid the reflections of the light on the glossy and explicit illustrations.

‘Can I help you, sir?’

It was wrong; it was quite wrong, and he knew it instantly, but keyed up to utter his prepared response (like a runner awaiting the starter's gun, and his reflexes responding to some other and irrelevant explosion before he could restrain them) he said, lowering the book and turning:

‘Have you got anything better than this?’

‘Are you interested in the art side, sir, or reading matter?’

Unless he had some specific reason for observing them (such as, although not exclusively, the wish to make them serve his appetites) Julius was always vague, even sometimes to the point of actual temporary blindness, in his attention to other people. Besides, he was at this moment intensely preoccupied.

He had only a tenuous, blurred impression of the man to whom he had put his stereotyped and privately ironic enquiry: an unremarkable blunt-faced man, in a grey mackintosh with the collar turned up and a brown trilby hat, slightly out of shape; a man who, to Julius—who was himself only twenty-three years old—seemed middle-aged, middle-aged and gloomy.

‘I think, yes, art. The art side.’

Julius was preoccupied because he was expecting a visitor to the shop. She had been overdue already for some ten minutes when Sammy had come through the curtains from the shop to the studio behind, where he (Julius) had been sorting the invoices, to instruct him to attend to the new customer at the specialist shelves.

‘Have you any particular interest, sir?’

Having sent out Julius, Sammy himself had remained in the studio. Of course, the wretched girl might break the appointment, which Julius was thinking now might be just as well, even if it meant that his own judgment would be slightly devalued in his employer’s eyes.

This comedian must be a complete beginner!

‘Could you give me some idea what you have in mind?’ This was standard procedure in the case of an unknown stranger. ‘You haven’t bought anything here before, have you?’

Julius was, in fact, thoroughly regretting his invitation to the girl. It had been merely a thoughtless act of casual malice—of the kind to which he was occasionally prone. He had met her only the previous evening and having listened for ten minutes without a break to her tedious and obvious inventions he had suddenly interjected:

‘You’ve no shame, have you? You’re proud of yourself.’

‘Shame!’ the girl had said. ‘Of course not. How funny of you!’

‘All right then,’ he had said, scarcely concealing his savage derision. ‘You’re the right type. I can fix you a job.’

He had given her the address of the bookshop and had told her to come at three o’clock.

And now he was stuck with this stuttering comedian—who, in fact, at the moment was saying:

‘Well, to be frank, I’m looking for something rather special.’

He was keeping his voice so low that Julius could only just hear him.

‘You understand they’re expensive,’ he said automatically.

The trouble was you could never make a quick sale of this kind with this kind of customer; they had to be played

along. It was essential, if the girl came, that he should have an opportunity of speaking to her before passing her on to Sammy; for Julius, who himself scarcely ever lied and despised the lies of others—especially such as those of the girl: lies of a flaccid, meaningless fantasy—had deceived his employer when he had told him about her that morning.

‘I think I’ve found a second girl for you,’ he had said. ‘I met her at a dismal party last night.’

Sammy had smiled his pleasant, trustful smile.

‘What makes you think that she will be suitable?’

When he had told Sammy that he had asked the girl to come to the shop that afternoon, his employer had said:

‘You didn’t tell her what her functions would be, did you, Julius?’

‘What do you think?’

But he *had* told her, curtly and explicitly, simply in the hope and expectation of seeing the balloon of her pre-tentious foolishness punctured.

She had, however, only replied: ‘Well, that’ll be a new job anyway, even for me. When do I start?’

And now Julius could not bear the thought that Sammy, who held him in higher regard than anyone else had ever done, who apparently placed a greater value on him than Julius placed on himself, should discover not only his indiscretion but also his deception.

But perhaps, Julius thought—it was already quarter-of-an-hour past the appointed time—she would not after all be coming; it had just been talk. His judgment would appear at fault, but that was better, infinitely better, than that Sammy should learn that he had wilfully deceived him.

No, he told himself with relief, she won’t be coming now.

‘Just wait a minute, will you?’ he said to the comedian. ‘I’ll see what I can find.’

It had been so wrong because Bateman had expected to have been served by the man he knew as Samson or

Samuels. He had not been prepared to anticipate the presence of an assistant in the shop.

When he had turned his head, hearing the light, young voice, to see that boy's face, bleak, smooth, bony, topped by dry blond hair, he had received a definite shock. Essentially a methodical man, he was accustomed to move step by step, assured of the firmness of the ground from which he levered himself forward. So that, although he had continued to act just as he might have done had he been served by the bookseller himself, it was with a fundamental sense of uneasiness, with the knowledge that behind him there was a patch of ground slippery and uncertain.

As it is those who are accustomed to good health whom sudden sickness most hardly afflicts, so it is the methodical, punctilious man who is most disconcerted by the chance, the untoward. When the assistant left him, Bateman, instead of considering—as he ought to have been considering—his future actions, was encumbered by the shock in the past.

So it would be true to say that he was not himself (himself being a man who reflected upon the past only in so far as it could influence the material future) when the girl so blatantly and imperiously entered the shop.

The door was flung open with a resounding clatter which caused everyone to look round. The girl, her coat open and trailing, advanced between the shelves rapidly, sweepingly, like someone who has to get as quickly as possible from one end to the other of a tilting deck in a storm. The manner in which she swung her body was bold, even brazen, but all the same—perhaps because of the excessive length of her strides—curiously athletic and unseductive. Similarly, her face, brightly painted and held in lines of a fashionably petulant disdain, achieved only the effect of eagerness and innocence.

She arrived at the table too soon for herself and then was at a loss, not knowing how to compose her limbs. She was standing just beyond arm's length of Bateman. He could smell her scent, sweet and too generously applied.



He was not himself. In that perhaps lay the explanation of the remarkable effect the girl had upon him. Certainly it was not prettiness or beauty, or that impression of sexual vitality which transcends prettiness or beauty. He saw her just as she was or seemed, even to observing that her features were shallow and commonplace, her hair without lustre and untidy, and her breasts (standing by the table, she was moving her body all the time, and had half-turned to face him, without looking at him), her breasts, with the coat open, their outlines clearly defined under a mustard-coloured jersey, small and drawn unnaturally apart by, presumably, an ill-fitting brassiere.

Yet he, who had for six years been married to a woman of considerable sexual appeal and in the two years since had totally withheld from women, experienced during the matter of seconds she was standing beside him (it could not have been more than two minutes from the time she had swept open the door of the shop to the time when the curtains parted to re-admit the young assistant), he experienced a definite physical response to her: a quickening of his pulse and heart-beat, a change in the rhythm of his breathing, a contraction in his stomach.

‘Hullo, I’m here.’

‘Oh, you’ve come.’

The girl and the assistant—scowling, Bateman observed—had spoken exactly together. The bravado of her confidence was pathetically apparent.

‘Wait a minute,’ the assistant said to the girl.

Indicating that Bateman should follow him, he stepped into the concealed annex.

‘I’m afraid this is all we’ve got . . .’

The transaction was swiftly concluded, Bateman scarcely glancing at what was offered to him.

‘Thank you, sir,’ the assistant said. ‘If you care to come back we might have something better.’

Bateman was seeing him now with, as it were, a different eye, a personal eye, resentful of the manner in which he had spoken to the girl. In particular, he noticed the dryness and pallor, seeming almost translucent, of the skin of his face and the chill indifference of his gaze.

'We'll have some others in a day or two. If you're interested.'

'Yes,' Bateman said. 'Yes, all right.'

'Good afternoon,' the assistant said.

Bateman passed so close to the girl that he brushed against her trailing coat.

'Well, I'm here,' he heard her say. 'I'm here. When do I start?'

The too bright, naïvely eager smile with which she spoke remained suspended in gigantic close-up before Bateman's inner eye for the twelve or so paces it took him to walk the length of the shop and out of the same door through which she had entered his life.

'You don't,' said Julius. He had persuaded himself that he was furious with her. 'Not if you don't listen to me. Aren't you even going to say you're sorry?'

It was not in his nature to be so concerned; he was displeased with himself and was half-aware of the fact that he was taking it out of this silly girl.

'I don't understand.'

'Flat broke you are, or say you are, and I get you a job and you don't even apologize for coming late.' Despite himself, he kept his voice subdued to the whisper that had become habitual during the weeks he had worked in the bookshop. 'Come round here.'

The girl stepped into the concealed corner.

'My watch had stopped, but if I'm too late I'll . . .'

'I'm going to take you in to see the boss,' Julius said. 'But there's one thing: you're not to tell him that you know what it's all about.'

The girl looked uncomprehending.

'God, do I have to spell it out! You're here because you want a job, and I told you he might be able to fix you up, but you don't . . .'

'Oh, I see.'

' . . . know what the job is. You hear that. You wait until he tells you, if he tells you, and then you're surprised.'

'I see,' the girl said again.

'That's if you want the job. If, after all your talk, you're not scared. Come on.'

He preceded her, only just holding the curtains apart behind him so that they brushed against her already untidy hair. They went through the untenanted but cluttered studio and Julius knocked on the door of Sammy's office—a formality which he omitted when he was on his own.

It was quite a small room, with the only windows both set high in the wall and facing a dark passage, so that here too artificial light was necessary. The bookseller, who had been sitting at his narrow desk—bare of accoutrements or ornament, except for the heavy and baleful bronze owl which stood there in constant watchfulness—rose and came forward, hand extended, with the smiling gentle courtesy which Julius by now knew to be not merely a characteristic but an ingrained part of him; which he knew and respected and by which he was sometimes exasperated.

'Mr Samson,' Julius said to the girl. 'What's your name? I mean your other name. I've forgotten.'

'How do you do,' the girl said. 'Veronica Barclay.'

'Please sit down, Miss Barclay,' Sammy said.

Julius hovered uncertainly while the girl arranged herself in the chair to which the bookseller had directed her, first putting her handbag on the floor beside her and then picking it up and placing it on her knee, making a movement to smooth down her skirt, which left the skirt unmoved.

'Cigarette?'

Sammy lit it for her and then resumed his seat at the desk. He waited a moment, still smiling gently, regarding the girl with that also ingrained respectfulness, the electric light reflected in the circular lenses of his glasses in flashes of brilliance.

'Julius told me you were looking for a job.'

'Yes,' the girl said. 'Yes, well, actually, I was going to the West Indies with a song-writer as a sort of secretary, but he was in a motor accident and so . . . Did he tell you about my leg?'

'Yes,' said the bookseller. 'He told me.'

'Six years in hospital,' the girl said. 'So I'm not trained for anything really, and so I just have to take what comes. I've had so many jobs. I shouldn't think there's a girl of my age anywhere who's had so many jobs.'

'Do you agree that all experience is valuable?'

'Maybe. I don't know.' The bookseller was leaning forward, his elbows on the desk, his hands clasped.

'I think so. Definitely.'

Julius, standing in the background, thought that perhaps he had made an irritated movement or that he had revealed his impatience through a change of expression, for he knew that nothing escaped Sammy, and now the bookseller turned to him and said:

'Perhaps you had better watch the shop, Julius.'

'All right.'

He was reluctant to leave the girl alone with Sammy, but it would not have occurred to him to argue.

'By the way,' Sammy said, just as Julius was going out of the door, 'did—excuse me, Miss Barclay—did that customer take anything, finally?'

'I just gave him the pretties.'

'That's right,' Sammy said. 'He will come back again if he is serious. Now, Miss Barclay, you were saying.'

Julius went back into the shop to find another man waiting at the table to be served. So perhaps he had not revealed his impatience; perhaps Sammy, whom nothing escaped, had heard—heard or divined—that this customer was awaiting attention. For in the two months he had known him Julius had grown to believe that not only did nothing tangible and relevant evade Sammy's regard, but also that he had special powers of divination, of empathy and of comprehension.

Waiting in the shop, Julius thought of how it had come about that he himself had been given a job by Sammy. He had been starving at the time, literally starving, which he knew to be almost impossible in this country, in this day and age, but which in fact he was, having eaten nothing for more than forty-eight hours, being without a single coin in his pockets and having no possessions, other

than the simple clothes he was wearing, which could be sold.

Therefore, he had decided to acquire some saleable possessions. It was easy enough to steal the books. Sheer chance—the fact that when he had passed and looked in the shop was empty—had led him to attempt to dispose of them to Sammy.

‘Review copies,’ he had said.

‘Have you the slips?’ asked the small, neat bookseller, framed by the plum-red curtains.

‘The slips?’

‘The review slips. We have to be careful, you know.’

‘I’m afraid I threw them away,’ Julius said. ‘You see, I’m new to it.’

‘All right,’ said the bookseller. ‘I will give you half price.’

He placed the books, which he had seemed hardly to look at beyond noting their prices, in a pile on the table and took some money from a drawer.

‘Is that right?’ he said, handing it to Julius.

‘Thanks.’ He put it in his pocket without counting it.

The bookseller was smiling faintly with that smile which now, two months later, Julius knew to be free of mockery or malice, knew to be only an expression of an essential sweetness.

Perhaps even he had known it then, for, with the money in his pocket and free to go—there was no one between him and the door and he could easily outpace the inoffensive bookseller—free to go freely . . . he had stayed.

The bookseller laid his hand on the pile of books.

‘These top three come from —’s,’ he said, naming the largest bookseller in the city. ‘And these others from . . .’

Now, two months later, Julius knew sufficient of the tricks of the trade to realize that on this occasion Sammy, in identifying the ownership of the stolen books, had not needed to resort to his powers of divination. On the other hand, how could he have known that Julius was starving?

‘It is not much money you have got now,’ he had said.

'One good meal, or two perhaps, and it is gone and you are back where you started. But possibly you only needed something to tide you over? Tomorrow or the next day you will be all right again?'

'I'll find something,' Julius had said. 'Something will turn up. It always has done so far.'

'What is your name?' the bookseller said.

Julius told him.

'I will give you a meal. In that way you will be able slightly to extend the time during which something may turn up.'

An hour later, after he had eaten a substantial meal in the room behind the curtains, he had accepted the job of assistant in the bookshop.

This afternoon business was somewhat brisker than on most days. Julius had attended to perhaps a dozen customers when the curtains parted and the girl came out, turning to exchange a final handshake with the bookseller.

'Well,' said Julius, 'did he tell you? Did he offer you the job?'

'Yes,' the girl said.

Even Julius noticed how much more composed she was than when she had entered the shop.

'And you're going through with it?'

'Of course,' the girl said. 'That's what I came for, wasn't it?'

'You didn't tell him that I had . . .' Julius's expression was stony.

'Would it worry you so much?' There was an unexpected dart of mischief in her glance. 'Supposing. Now he's told me about it himself, it would be all right, wouldn't it?'

'But I didn't, my sweet,' she added quickly. 'That's just our secret. I wouldn't have given you away for worlds.'

In the street again, Bateman had turned unthinkingly left, the way he had come, walking in a daze, almost unaware of what he was doing. The image of the girl's face, her tremulous and eager smile, which he had borne from

the bookshop, had vanished, but he carried with him a kind of non-figurative impression, the substance of her, her enduring inexperience and the too sweet smell of her scent.

He was not himself; and perhaps time or circumstance or whatever you will had been waiting for just such a moment for just such a confrontation, the pattern and regimen of at any rate the last two years (or the last eight) having brought him inevitably to that moment when he would be overwhelmed by a woman.

At the first turning he came to he turned left again because that was the easiest thing to do and also because it kept him within the compass of the bookshop. In this section of the city all the streets were narrow and congested and somewhat shabby, emanating an aura of squalor and decay. He was so familiar with it as not to notice it.

Bateman had been thirty years old when he had married. He had been thirty-one years old when he had known beyond any further possibility of doubt of his wife's infidelity, although that knowledge could have been predated by six months or maybe more—maybe, he sometimes thought, right back to, say, the day after he had married her, or the first day following when she had been out of his presence for ten minutes or quarter of an hour, or however long it took her to arrange and commit—if he had been just a degree less reluctant to admit the evidence which she laid before him.

Laid before him—for the point was that her infidelities stemmed not from a simple lust or addiction (which, after all, would have been a kind of generosity, a kind of love) but from a complicated and deep-rooted hatred, a hatred of himself as husband, which required her to select for her satisfaction those who worked with him or lived by him or were acquainted with him in some other fashion, and also to choose the circumstances which would reveal it most blatantly to him.

He had been thirty-four years old when he had left her, obtaining a transfer to his present position. He had been thirty-six years old when he had obtained a divorce.

Since leaving her he had never had or wanted another woman.

He turned left again—still within the compass of the bookshop, doubling back, the two years (or the eight) having brought him to this point. He was more composed now, aware of what he was doing, if not of what was happening to him. He looked at his watch, calculating the time at his disposal.

Suddenly, immediately in front of a shoe-shop—a cheap shop, like nearly all the others in this part of the city, with shoes and boots strung outside like vegetables—he halted in his tracks. He had just recalled the last words he had heard the girl utter: *When do I start?* And he realized their formidable implications. But in that instant also—marked for him for ever, although he would not know it, by the sharp tang of leather—he understood that now he would have to continue, pursue, or forfeit any hope of future self-respect.

Pledged, as it were, to action, he became more like the man he was used to being. He looked at his watch again, making different calculations. He knew that in the same street as the bookshop, on the opposite side, there was a small café.

How long since he had left the bookshop? Not more than five minutes. It was likely—no, certain, he told himself—that the girl was still there.

It was just the sort of café that one would expect in that street. The Mediterranean assistant wore a dirty white jacket. The four men at the innermost table, who carefully avoided looking at Bateman after a first hostile appraisal, bore an air of secrecy and illegality like a trademark.

He took his cup of coffee to a table by the window, from which he could see the bookshop—with some difficulty because of the white lettering smeared on the glass. Reaching in his pocket for a packet of cigarettes—only a cigarette could make the coffee tolerable!—he felt the packet which he had received from the bookseller's young assistant, but it no longer interested him.

Waiting. Watching. He had waited and watched often enough like this to know that he presented a picture of



solid impassivity whatever internal tensions gripped him. What worried him above everything else—or, rather, the immediate worry which he permitted to rise to the surface above his more fundamental cause for concern—was how he would approach her.

There had been a time, he thought, there had been a time when . . . but one gets, has got, older; through lack of practice one has lost the knack. Suppose, he thought, not without humour, she called a policeman. He rehearsed various phrases.

He stubbed out his cigarette in the tin ashtray. He was prepared now to wait—the calculations he had made earlier forgotten—all day if necessary.

He had to wait only a matter of another twenty minutes. Coming out of the shop, she looked quickly in both directions, and then, coat still trailing, crossed the road, walking directly towards the café. Rising to his feet, Bateman lost sight of her for a moment behind a parked lorry.

He was at the door of the café. She was a yard away. He forgot all the rehearsed phrases.

And even before he spoke he realized from the expression on her face, surprised but not startled, even possibly pleased, that she knew he was going to speak.

## Chapter 2

IT had been an extraordinary day, Veronica Barclay I thought, extraordinary even for her, an extraordinary girl to whom extraordinary things were always happening.

She wished that somebody would come in to whom she could tell it.

She imagined herself telling it:

how absolutely broke I was yesterday, my sweet, and here now today I am, well, if not rolling in it precisely, well, real solid pound notes, look, and thank god that poisonous cider which has been the cause of my undoing so often, so often, but tonight we can drink something more refined-like, more fitting for a west country gentlewoman, ha-ha;

well, you know how absolutely broke I was yesterday, and then last night at Mimi's, and oh my dear god what a crowd she had, my sweet, I met a bizarre young man and isn't it extraordinary how just, just when your prospects are hopelessly and utterly black something turns, always does, turns up;

it always has done with me, you know, ever since after six years, well you know, don't you, I came out of hospital and no training at all, no training for absolutely anything, literally anything;

well, this young man said I can fix you up in a job if you really, and this job if you guessed for a thousand years you'd never; never, never, never, my sweet;

no;

no;

no, you'll never;

no, certainly not, nothing so common-like, ha-ha, though you're getting warm, but I'll tell you in its proper place, though this young man told me then but there was something queer about that and it had to be a secret and I can't say I'm surprised considering;

well, he gave me the address and he told me to come there at, and my watch had stopped and I couldn't find

it, all among the rubber goods and the hormones, and a horrid quite horrid fruit market in the street, where I may say I nearly, but that's another story;

at any rate, I get to this bookshop and this young man, after he's blown me up for being late, yes, actually he did, he takes me into his, into his . . .

Suddenly Veronica did not want to tell it any more, or at least to tell it like this, in make-believe, sitting as she was, alone, over her first drink, in the almost empty saloon bar of the public-house around the corner from the Victorian mansion in which she occupied, alone, one of the smallest, cheapest and dingiest rooms.

She could have told Benny, or have told him at least a part of it, but it was his day off. Brown, the landlord, was behind the bar and she disliked Brown because he patronized her and so she could not tell him either. Nor that funny little old man who was sitting by himself reading a newspaper, because he never spoke to anybody; nor the two men, who were the only other occupants of the small, characterless bar, because they were strangers and unfriendly—at least, they had ignored her cheerful smile of greeting when she had come in.

She wished some of the gang had been there. By 'the gang' she meant the dozen or so oddly assorted—yet, in another sense, curiously homogeneous—men and women with whom she was acquainted who frequented this bar and also a neighbouring club of which Veronica was a member. She referred to them as 'the gang' because of the word's implications of solidarity and confraternity, although they were united by no stronger link than the accident of proximity, and, perhaps, a shared loneliness.

But neither to another nor to herself would Veronica have admitted being lonely. An essential part of the fantasy sustaining her was derived from her belief in the rich variety and excitement of her existence.

'I'll have another gin,' she said.

The landlord put the glass in front of her without saying anything.

'You can see I'm in the money again.' She carefully

displayed the thin roll of notes which the bookseller had given her.

'There's a clever girl,' said the landlord.

The fact that the bookseller should have given her the money just like that, on trust, for he had only her word that she would return the next morning, and if she backed out he would scarcely have been able to do anything about it, would he, was perhaps the most extraordinary incident of that extraordinary day, Veronica thought.

Because she was (of course) scrupulously honest it did not follow that everyone recognized her honesty. But then the bookseller was a gentleman, I mean in the old-fashioned, ha-ha, sense of the word.

Veronica had suddenly a clear impression of him as she had first seen him, rising from the desk to greet her: a . . . a dapper man, she thought, in a dark brown suit which, come to think of it, had a slightly foreign look about it, and his broad, triangular face, which might have been foreign too, eastern, Mongolian, and his eyes . . .

That was what she remembered best about him—his eyes: behind his benignly sparkling glasses, below his domed forehead, they had seemed to be resting upon her throughout their interview. They were wide, brown eyes, but what had impressed her most had been their suggestion of depth. She recalled also that his mouth was well-defined and humorous; his body slight yet compact and propounding strength. She also saw again the soft hair on the back of his hands, lighter or darker than the skin beneath according to the play of the light.

Veronica maintained only a tangential contact with reality; but now, sitting on the bar stool, she was able half to admit to herself that, under the spell of those remarkable eyes, she had that afternoon come much nearer to acknowledging her true and personal identity than she was accustomed to.

The bookseller had, for instance, enquired about her family.

'I haven't got a family—that counts, anyway.'

Generally she maintained, even often to herself, an elevated and elaborate and wholly fictitious series of

blood relationships. Before the bookseller, her false selves fell away.

She remembered now, too, his words at the end of their interview:

'I am very glad we have come to our arrangement. Only a few people are truly suitable, Miss Barclay. It may in the circumstances sound a peculiar thing to say, but I believe that you may find this an experience of great value at this particular stage of your life, perhaps a kind of release, a liberation.

'And would you please take this on account?'

Well, that was extraordinary enough, considering, Veronica thought now. And yet there was more to come. She felt again a great impatience to tell it.

The two strangers had gone out. Brown, his back to her, was polishing glasses. The bar was quite silent except for the radio, turned low, relaying dance music. Veronica hummed for a moment in tune with the radio.

She emptied her glass and stood up. Some of the gang, someone to whom she could tell it, must be at the club.

It was dark outside but the main street into which shortly she turned was busy and well-lit. She became just one solitary girl—among many—hurrying along the pavement, handbag dangling from her arm, coat trailing, ordinary, but sustained and illuminated by the exuberance of her imagination.

It was not, she was thinking, as if she were unused to being accosted, picked up if you like, although perhaps it did not happen as often as she, eager for experience, would have wished; when in the past such encounters had taken place subsequent developments had, for reasons which she was incapable of analysing, generally proved disappointing.

This afternoon, however, it had been different. Again, she lacked the capacity to identify the particular distinction, but she felt vaguely that she had been selected, chosen as an individual and not merely an anonymous approachable female of suitable age.

Just like that, out of the door of that horrid little café. And, knowing somehow that he was going to speak to her

even before he opened his mouth, she did not hear his first words, or if she heard them could not now remember them.

And then he had said: 'You must forgive me. I don't make a habit of this sort of thing. If you would just let me walk with you a little way.'

To which she had replied: 'And do you think I make a habit, either? But I'm safe here, aren't I, I mean you couldn't here, could you, even if you wanted to?'

So he had walked with her, having asked her where she was going, and she having invented an urgent appointment, for which she was already late, with a man of mysterious distinction in the hallway of a fashionable hotel.

He had been different too because he had had so little to say for himself, not even telling her his name (or a name, because she wasn't born yesterday) until she had told him hers and had then asked him: James Bateman.

'And I suppose, of course you aren't married, you wouldn't be, would you, speaking to a strange girl in the street?'

'No, I'm not married,' he had replied.

'So you say anyway. And what do you do?'

'I beg your pardon.'

'For a living. Or perhaps you're a rich gentleman of independent means.'

'Oh, nothing very exciting,' he had said. 'What about you?'

'I do all sorts of things.' She had been waiting to be asked. 'I shouldn't think there's a girl anywhere who's done as many things as I have, ever since after six years I came out of hospital, with my leg . . .'

Because he had had so little to say for himself she had told him in detail—the meticulous detail of her dream, her fantasy.

'And what are you doing now?'

'Oh, now,' she said, 'now I've got a new job, yet another. In fact when you met me—picked me up, I suppose you'd call it—I'd just . . . And this one really is, really is, even for me. But all experience is valuable for itself, don't you think?'

'Working in that bookshop?'

'Well, no, yes, well not exactly. I don't think I can tell you.'

She had taken his arm just lightly, putting her fingers within his elbow, as they had crossed the road and she then applied a little pressure.

'I don't think I know you well enough to tell you, Mr Bateman, if that is your name, because I wasn't born yesterday, ha-ha. Yet.'

They had come almost to the hotel she had named.

'Oh, I am late, dreadfully late.'

He had not paid her a single compliment so far. 'Do you think he, my swish admirer, will have waited for me?'

'I don't know. How can I say?'

They had come right up to the hotel, by the elbow of the ornately uniformed commissionaire, and were standing facing each other. He was not, she had to admit, a very striking man.

'Tell me,' she said. 'Tell me just one thing, Mr Bateman, James Bateman, why did you speak to me? I mean why me, when so many other girls?'

The traffic was roaring by and pedestrians were passing on each side of them. Somewhere nearby a road drill was in operation. He turned his head away, and she could not hear his muttered answer—except sufficiently to tell that again he had failed to take the opportunity of paying the conventional, almost obligatory compliment.

'Goodbye,' she shouted. 'I must go. He'll be so furious with me.'

'Wait,' he said urgently. He put his hand on her forearm although she had not actually moved away. 'Wait a moment.'

'Be quick.'

'We haven't . . . How do I get in touch with you?'

'Oh!' She put great surprise into it. 'I don't know whether.'

'Tonight?' he had said. 'I shall be free any time after eight o'clock.'

'Tonight!' She made the word a cry of amused and

amazed outrage. 'Tonight I shall be twenty miles away, on the river. There's a wild party and I simply must . . .'

'Give me your phone number.'

'You really want it?' she said. 'I could give you a wrong number, a made-up number.'

'I know you could,' he said. 'Please.'

She told him it. He wrote it down carefully in a notebook and checked it back.

'Good-bye,' she said again. 'He'll be so furious.'

She had taken a step away, and then turned her head, giving him a smile that she believed to be dazzling.

'I think you're rather nice,' she said. 'For a pick-up, ha-ha.'

And that was what she truly thought, continued to think as she had swept through the lobby of the hotel and into the cloakroom, and then as she had departed by another exit into another street, just in case he had waited, just in case he had imagined that her other admirer might have grown impatient and have departed, and she would have come out again.

And thought now: having left the main road and turned into the narrow street where the club was, in the basement of a tall and ugly Victorian mansion, very similar in fact to the one in which Veronica lived.

In the club she found that for which she had been seeking: among the seven or eight people there just one whom she knew, a member of the gang, one to whom she could tell it; for it was not sufficient that she alone should know the extraordinary nature of the events that she attracted to herself: whether actual or fabulous, they lost substance, dissolved, unless—as it were—fixed (as a photographic print is fixed) through the apprehensions of another intelligence.

'So here I am, surprise, surprise, you say, in the money again. But you'd never guess just how, how the most extraordinary . . .'



## Chapter 3

A YELLOW scarf around the thick, black, curled hair which was her especial pride, a starched apron over her dress, Louise Crampton, in the opaque morning sunlight, pushed the vacuum-cleaner—which, in another sense, was also her especial pride—over the carpet of her sitting-room.

She performed this action in the spirit in which she carried through all her household duties: a kind of combination of contentment and boredom, unthinkingly but yet scrupulously, as an animal—a cat, say—cleans itself. For in a very real sense this nearly new house, with three bedrooms, bought on a ninety per cent mortgage—a house resembling, but not identical with, all the others in this wide street in this pleasant suburb—was a part of herself, its well-being was her well-being and any wound inflicted upon it would pain her as she would be pained by a physical injury to her own body.

Having put away the vacuum-cleaner, she switched on the radio. This, too, was an automatic action. Her husband did not like it on before he went to work and she always waited until this particular point in the pattern of her morning's activities. The tunnels of dust seemed to dance to the music.

Then, as always when she switched on the radio, she thought of her husband or, rather, as a reflex, received an impression of him—perhaps also in a way compounded of contentment and of boredom—visualizing him as she had seen him from the front door when she had waved good-bye, striding in his familiar plodding way down the tree-lined street, the battered attaché case, filled with his pupils' exercise-books, dangling from his hand.

At this moment her features, which were too heavy for conventional prettiness, suggesting, in fact, a sullenness which was never a part of her nature, would be lightened by something which was not positively a smile but rather an inflection, a radiance.

Yet, although so far everything had happened just as it

happened every day, she knew that this was not to be a morning like the majority of her mornings, filled by tasks around the house and the day's shopping, and she felt that sense of mild excitement which other women in her position often experience when they look forward to some break from their habitual routine—a film matinée, perhaps, or a special shopping expedition to the city's centre.

She was cleaning the wash-basin when the expected telephone call came. The telephone stood on a table in the hall under a mirror and while she was speaking Louise was watching herself unwind the scarf on her head, an action which illustrated that for this morning her household tasks were virtually at an end.

'Good morning, Mr Samson,' she said.

'Yes, I am almost ready. Eleven o'clock, as usual.' She shook loose her heavy hair.

'Will Bertie be coming?'

She watched herself listening, with her free hand smoothing the hair on her neck, her bare white arm forming a graceful triangle.

'Another girl! Where did she come from?'

In response to what was said at the other end of the line, she laughed—a woman's laugh, ungirlish, low and rich.

'Of course I don't mind. Good-bye then, Mr Samson.'

She had plenty of time. She went round from room to room of the house, replacing in their proper positions articles that had been left lying about, straightening the ornaments, winding a clock.

Technically, of course, legally, it was her husband's house (if not, even more technically, the property of the Building Society) but she felt it to be, knew it to be hers, not only in the sense that most houses, homes are the creation of the woman who lives in them, but also because in this particular case they (she and her husband) would never have been there and so, from her point of view, the house would not have existed had it not been for her special, private and individual efforts. This thought always gave her particular satisfaction and she smiled to herself, a smile of tenderness for her husband's clumsy imperception and innocence.

She repaired her make-up at the dressing-table in their bedroom (they had paid off the hire purchase on the suite only the previous month) and dallied over the choice of ear-rings, finally selecting a heavy, clasped pair which had been her husband's gift to her on her last, her twenty-ninth, birthday. She smoothed her stockings, smoothed her hair—again—smoothed her dress over her broad hips; turned off the radio, locked the back door, checked the electric switches . . . and so on.

At just about the same time, Herbert (or Bert or Bertie) Dodds was enjoying a vigorous mock-argument with his landlady.

He knew that when it came to the point the old lady was so infatuated by his brawny boxer's virility that she would concede him anything, but apparently it gave her pleasure to chide him, and, although he would not have admitted it, he liked her treating him as an errant small boy, to be protected from his own wilfulness and the world's evils.

'And if you lie in bed half the morning, how do you expect me to do your room out, let alone . . .'

'Nag, nag, nag,' said Bertie. 'Chuck, chuck, chuck, like an old hen. I tell you I had a thick night last night. Not what you're thinking, you wicked old woman. With the boys for once.'

'And what about that nice girl, that Jean . . .' his landlady began.

Bertie, who was in his dressing-gown, swung the cord at her. Despite his thick night, he was exploding with energy.

'There you go again. I've told you a dozen times she isn't a nice girl, she's a little bed-rabbit, shall I spell it for you, a little w-h- . . .'

At that point the telephone rang.

'I expect it's for you, it's bound to be,' said his landlady.

'Oh, God!' said Bertie. 'Is that the time? Yes, of course it's for me. Get out of the way, you old . . .'

'Hullo, hullo. Yes, Sammy, yes, old boy. All but ready.'

He waved his hand at his landlady.

'Sure. Good. Sure. The more the merrier, I say. You know me, indestructible. Just leave her to Dodds, I'll . . .

'O.K., Sammy. I maka da joke. See you eleven on the dot. Good-bye, Sammy, good-bye, old boy.'

He slapped his landlady gently on the rump in passing.

'My agent,' he said.

Webber the photographer was the first to arrive. He was a man with a furtive air about him, a roquent air. He was small and slight and had a grey, dry skin, with thin but deep lines, like razor cuts, running vertically to his mouth. His clothes were stained and crumpled, but in dazzling contrast he wore obviously expensive hand-sewn shoes, brilliantly polished.

He was one of those whom Julius, in his youthful arrogance and self-absorption, found it easy to ignore—fundamentally to ignore, to fail to see. He was scarcely to be recognized as a fellow human creature and any form of true communication between them was wholly out of the question.

Nevertheless, they passed—as it is put—the time of day together.

'Do you know if he's going to make it a long session?' Webber said. 'I've got another job at lunch-time.'

'I wouldn't know,' said Julius. 'You'll be able to ask him, won't you?'

'There's another girl today, I believe, a new girl?'

'If she turns up,' said Julius. 'Sammy gave her a fiver last night so she probably won't.'

'As well as . . .'

'Louise, yes.' He added, with that ascetic youthful contempt which the photographer could, if he chose, consider to be not merely general but specifically directed against himself: 'There's what they call a consumer demand, it seems.'

Webber lit another cigarette from the one he was smoking. He had a faint yellow stain on his upper lip.

'Well, I'll be going in,' he said.

He made no move, however, and after an instant, wait-

ing perhaps for Julius to speak—which he did not—he went on tentatively:

‘I haven’t been so good lately. Sick as a dog this morning again.’

And waited—again in vain—for Julius to say something.

‘Then I’ll be going in.’

He parted the red curtains.

You smoke too much: that was what Julius had almost said. He had refrained not from any delicacy of feeling but because even such a curt and unsympathetic comment would have been a kind of involvement, a kind of recognition of the photographer’s humanity.

He had said once to Sammy, shortly after meeting Webber for the first time: ‘He’s like something that crawls out when you lift up a stone.’

He now knew better than to make such a remark. The bookseller’s placid and smiling response had found one of those corners of Julius’s self-esteem which were still vulnerable:

‘You will grow up in time, Julius. And perhaps then you will abstain from clichés as well.’

Louise came next. Julius rather liked her, with the qualification that liking to him meant something altogether more austere, more impersonal than to most people. Say, he appreciated that quality of certainty, of self-sufficiency which he recognized in her.

‘Webber’s here. He’s the only one,’ he said.

‘What about this new girl?’

‘She hasn’t shown up yet.’

‘Have you seen her, Julius?’ Louise asked.

Julius grunted affirmatively. A little reluctantly, he added: ‘I found her.’

Louise widened her eyes in simulated astonishment. ‘Oh, Julius, don’t say you’re becoming interested at last. She must be really something special to interest Julius.’

‘Special all right,’ he said. ‘I think you’re in for quite a session. Perhaps I shall even come in to watch it. That’s if she comes.’

However, she came—right on the stroke of eleven

o'clock, again pushing open the door with that absurd air of over-confidence which so ill became her.

'I'm not late, am I? I am on time.'

'Not so loud.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'You can go on in,' Julius said. 'You know' the studio.' She had hesitated.

'Go on,' said Julius. 'With all your experience you can take these little fun and games in your stride.'

He was not trying particularly to affront or wound her: he spoke thus only from necessity, using the weapons he had to use to become the sort of man he wished to become.

'Mr Samson's in there, is he?'

'Sammy's there,' Julius said, with a growing tolerance, for he realized that had he denied it she might have turned and run; that already she had learned to trust, as he trusted.

The girl went in.

That left only Bertie. Julius did not speak to him at all—because he was given no opportunity to do so. Bertie entered on the trot.

'Late again, Dodds, late again,' he said, as he pushed past Julius and crashed through the curtains.

Julius adjusted the curtains behind him, ensuring that they were fully drawn. Despite what he had said to Louise, he had no inclination to attend the proceedings in the studio. He had done so once and had regarded them with a mild, dispassionate interest, but had found in them nothing to contribute to his dedicated resolution. It was not sufficient that any activity should merely not offend him; everything had to play a significant part in leading him along the path that he had chosen.

Besides, it was on these occasions not only his duty to serve as a kind of guard or sentry but also to attend to the shop. There were not many customers at this time of day: one 'specialist', whose requirements he was able quickly to satisfy; two or three conventional buyers; and the browsers upon whom he kept a desultory watch.

He was not bored: nothing bored him, as he hoped that soon, when he had become entirely the man whom he

wished to become, nothing would please or move him. There were some new books to be unpacked, a few of which Sammy wanted to be displayed in the window.

It was a bright spring morning and the narrow street was busy, with delivery vans and lorries unloading. It was also one of those streets in which men are almost always to be seen standing about aimlessly, as it is said—but who is to recognize or judge another's aims?

Several of those standing on the pavements or passing by were already familiar by sight to Julius, for the twisting network of streets in which the bookshop was situated formed something of a closed and corporate community. Arranging the books on the stands in the window, he nodded impassively or lifted a hand to a few of the passers-by—neighbouring shopkeepers or waiters or regular frequenters of the street's numerous small cafés and restaurants.

Probably he would not have consciously noticed the middle-aged man in the raincoat and the slightly misshapen trilby hat, who passed by twice, had he not so obtrusively kept his gaze averted from the bookshop window. As it was, the sight of him impressed Julius yet again with the scope of Sammy's prescience, for had the bookseller not forecast his return?

Julius thought that the comedian was trying to bring himself to the point when he would again enter the bookshop, and for a while, having returned to the table before the curtains, he found himself expecting him each time the door was opened; but the comedian did not reappear and before very long Julius had forgotten him.

James Bateman, sitting at the same place in the café as the previous afternoon, knew that it would be difficult for him to justify his actions—even to justify them to himself, let alone a possible interrogator.

What could he hope to learn sitting there, his view of the bookshop partially obscured by a line of trade vans?

He was not yet prepared to admit what had happened to him: that he was in the grip of an obsession which

rendered the normal judgments of his conduct as irrelevant as the standards of the past to a man struck suddenly blind, or translated to a world in which all values had been reversed.

It might have been thought, for instance, that he—sceptical by nature, suspicious by virtue of his experience—would have been disillusioned (in the literal meaning of the word) even by his brief encounter with the girl the previous day; that, if her outrageous egotism had not repelled him, he would have recognized in her naïve romancings the symptoms of an aberrant mind.

It is well known, however, that confidence tricksters (just for example) find their readiest victims in the shrewdest businessmen, those whose training has made them hyper-sensitive to fraudulence. And when they are gulled they are gulled the more completely.

It might have been that had Veronica Barclay, after he had spoken to her, displayed merely a commonplace normality he would have realized the extravagance of his initial response to the sight of her in the bookshop. Instead, he had been totally fascinated by what she had said to him, the glimpses she had revealed of a life which seemed to him singular, exotic, not necessarily creditable but wholly credible.

It has been suggested, although it remains unproved, that the victims of the confidence trickster are not truly deceived but unconsciously desire their own downfall. For practical purposes, however, it comes to the same thing; for practical purposes, James Bateman was ensnared, enchanted.

He had in the first place been afraid that she might, as she herself had suggested, have given him a false telephone number; so he had rung the number that same evening—to have his fears at first confirmed, for the woman who answered the call had said that she did not know the name of Miss Barclay; then she had gone away and, after a long interval, someone else had come to the telephone and had said that Miss Barclay was out.

He had telephoned again this morning, to be told again that Miss Barclay was not available.



Bateman lived alone, fending entirely for himself and deriving a kind of spinsterish satisfaction from performing his domestic tasks with meticulous care; but this morning he had been unable to compose himself to them.

Looking from his window, he had seen a boy and a girl—very young, probably even schoolchildren—walking slowly with their arms around each other. In the days when he had first left his wife such a sight had seemed to him an enormous injustice; that the happiness of others was possible meant that the world had no meaning, that his own existence was a monstrosity. He had slowly become resigned—or believed that he had—to that particular form of injustice.

The boy and girl that morning had stopped in a position where he could see them, opposite some gaudy posters to which the boy was obviously drawing the girl's attention. He had said something to her that seemed to be affectionate or bantering, and she had turned her head and drawn her lips lightly along the side of his face. Then they had gone on.

In that instant Bateman had caught himself regarding the young lovers with a feeling of tenderness, a sympathy which came from the instinctive conviction that he himself was no longer excluded from the just world in which happiness was possible . . . Even if, for himself, only just possible: for although he was as yet unaware of the full complexity of his situation he knew that he was placing himself in a position vulnerable to—no, even courting—disaster.

He had been drawn into the ambience of the bookshop this morning not by any conscious hope or expectation of seeing her or of furthering his objects, but merely by the compelling force it exerted as the only place with which he could connect her.

And now, sitting in this squalid café, he had abandoned any pretence of conducting himself with discrimination or prudence; although he did not know it, he was awaiting a sign.

When it was over Veronica wanted to get away as quickly as she could, by herself. She knew that that which

had happened had effected something cataclysmic within her, leaving her bewildered, and she felt the need to withdraw for a time to reassemble the shattered fragments of her personality.

The man they called Bertie seemed to be lingering. The photographer and the other girl (really, seeing her after, you couldn't looking imagine that) had already departed. That boy Julius had come into the studio and was talking to Mr Samson.

Veronica dallied over her last preparations, waiting for Bertie to leave.

'Which way are you going, my dear?' Bertie said.

She was not looking at him and she wondered for a moment if she could pretend that she did not know he was speaking to her, and then realized that she could not.

'Oh, I don't know.'

'If you haven't got a lunch date, I know a little Italian place not far away.'

She experienced a surge of panic, feeling that all eyes—that meant Bertie's and Julius's and Mr Samson's—were on her, but even in her embarrassment thinking: how funny that now I should (her cheeks burning) when during all that, when it might have been expected, I wasn't shy or ashamed or anything like that at all.

'Oh, I don't know.'

Mr Samson's voice relieved her. 'Bertie, if you don't mind, I want to have a talk with Miss Barclay.'

To her, he said: 'You don't have to hurry away, do you?'

'O.K.,' said Bertie, 'I'll be marching. At your service as ever, Sammy, when required. And yours, too, Veronica, my dove.'

'Let us go into the office,' Mr Samson said. 'Perhaps Julius will make us some coffee. Or would you rather have a drink? We have . . .'

'Yes,' Veronica said, 'yes, please, coffee.'

She felt weak, flustered, unsure of herself in a strange way. She sat in the same chair as she had sat during her first interview with him and he at the same desk, bare except for the bronze and unwinking owl.

He spread his hands and smiled. 'Well?'

Veronica smiled uncertainly in reply.

'Do you think you want to continue with us? Or has once been sufficient? Was it just a further experience you were seeking, something to add to your store of experiences?' He spoke without mockery, indeed, although in a kindly way, rather impersonally.

'Perhaps. I don't know.' She had anticipated that she might be asked this, and had already decided that, anyway, she would say yes, yes, of course she wanted to, even if, for she didn't have to come again if she decided no, did she? 'I'll have to . . .'

' . . . think about it,' he finished for her. 'To recollect in tranquillity. May I say that I very much hope you will stay with us? And so does Bertie, I am sure. And Louise.'

His tone was casual, conversational, but she felt his eyes fixed upon her—those remarkable and persuasive eyes—and their effect now was to soothe and reassure.

'What impression did you form of Louise?'

'Louise! Oh, well, it's hard to . . .' she began. 'I don't think I could ever have imagined that she, that she . . .'

' . . . would be doing this.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' Veronica said.

'Louise has what could be described as the truly professional approach. To her, it is a job of work. She was formerly, before her marriage, a model of a more conventional type. In fact, she had decided to return to that work and it was then that I obtained her services through a normal and what might be called legitimate agency.'

Veronica had the impression that he was speaking to her as a doctor does sometimes—and, Good Lord, she should know all about them, shouldn't she?—lightly and obliquely to disarm and allay trepidation.

'Yes,' she said.

'Although that is only a part of the truth, the truth on one level perhaps, not probing very deeply. Of course, in her own way—a more complicated way than Bertie's, for instance—she finds satisfaction in what we do here. Although this could not be understood by an outsider, she

finds a kind of fulfilment.' He paused. 'And you, Miss Barclay?'

It was the doctor concluding the generalities and coming to the case in hand: the diagnosis, treatment and prognosis.

'I don't know.'

It struck her suddenly that much more remarkable than what had happened before was that now she should be sitting here calmly discussing it, the bookseller opposite equable and decorous, like a doctor.

'I hadn't thought it would be . . . like it was.'

'Did you perhaps expect to look forward to being shocked?'

'I suppose yes, in a way.'

'And were you?'

'Yes,' said Veronica, somewhat defiantly. 'But it wasn't . . .'

' . . . in the way you expected,' he concluded for her. 'The trouble with having preconceived ideas is that when reality does not accord with them one tends to feel affronted, one's self-esteem is wounded. But no one would ever be shocked by anything—not even by the activities within our studio—if it were realized that . . .'

At this point Julius came in with the coffee.

' . . . in the end it amounted only to vanity.' The bookseller took the tray from him. 'Whether that would be a good thing or not is another matter, for it could be argued that to be shocked is to be liberated.'

He poured out the coffee. While they were drinking it—just she and Mr Samson, Julius having left the room after delivering the tray—the bookseller changed the topic of conversation, encouraging Veronica to speak about herself. Again she found that she was telling him about matters which normally she not only would never disclose to another but which she also as a rule contrived to conceal from herself.

Then, when he stood up and she knew that it was time for her to depart, he said:

'I remember once the police officer who was prosecuting handling the exhibits—that was before the case began—

with considerable relish. Indeed, his remarks were not without wit. But that did not stop him, when the time came for him to give evidence, expressing the most fervent moral disapproval and disgust. And he was quite sincere, for people have public and private standards of morality, and there is generally a great gap between the two.' He was smiling at Veronica. 'Perhaps that was what happened in your case this morning. You discovered the great divide between your preconceived morality and the morality of your true self. What really shocked you was that you were not shocked, that perhaps in fact you even . . .'

'I don't know,' said Veronica. 'I don't know.' She felt a resentment which she could not define.

'It is quite usual,' said the bookseller. 'Like the police officer, who, in common with many people, enjoyed the products of what I like nowadays to call my craft but—again like most people—was able to reconcile his own particular pleasure with a general rationalized disapproval.'

He helped her on with her coat.

'I am not pressing you, but I hope you will decide to come back and work with us again.'

Finally, as he was escorting her out, he said: 'By the way, I mentioned the police officer deliberately. We have to maintain a certain discretion.'

When he had gone into the studio after the session was over, Julius had taken the opportunity of telling Sammy that he had seen that comedian who was in the shop yesterday this morning hovering outside.

Sammy had said merely: 'All right. Perhaps he is the type who has always to work himself up to the point. Tell me if you see him again.'

It was only by chance that Julius was standing by the shop door when the girl left. She did not speak to him, seeming even to fail to observe him. He was quite unconcerned by this, but a kind of amused or scornful speculation drew his eyes to follow her as she crossed the road between the stationary trade-vans.

So it was that into his view, as she stepped on to the

opposite pavement, came the comedian in the mackintosh and brown and battered hat; and Julius (now with an altogether more concentrated attention) watched them as they stood briefly talking there—not altogether, he thought, like strangers; and then as they walked off side by side.

The trouble was he had come to the city too late in his life to know about the sort of places to which one should invite a girl. There had never before been an occasion when he had required to know. There were certain aspects of the city's life and geography with which Bateman had become as familiar as any native, but these were completely irrelevant to the present situation and so he felt as lost and inadequate as if he had been suddenly transplanted to a strange foreign capital.

When—to a surprise so strong that it had at first overborne his pleasure—she had accepted his tentatively phrased invitation to lunch he had not even known where to take her, because the establishments in which he was used to having his plain and purely functional meals were obviously unsuitable. Finally, they had gone into an expensive restaurant, which he knew only from the outside, where they had had to share a table with two businessmen, who talked continuously, in terms of awe and of malicious envy, of someone to whom they referred only—mysteriously—by his initials, C. R.

The meal—not only because of the businessmen and the absent but dominating C. R.—had been a bleak failure. The girl, who on the previous occasion of their meeting had talked with such a (to Bateman) dazzling vivacity, had remained almost completely silent, speaking when she did speak with a curious remoteness, so that he imagined a mounting boredom with himself, which further reduced his rusty capacity for small talk.

Also, she had had no appetite, in the first place declining to choose what she would eat, and then when he had ordered for her merely toying with it and leaving the major portions of each dish.

'I'm sorry,' she had said once, 'I'm not hungry.'

He had thought then that the restaurant was after all not really expensive, but only so relatively to his own experience, and that she, although polite, was disgusted by the crude and, doubtless, inexpensive, if not cheap, nature of the food laid before her.

Yet, with greater objectivity, he partially recognized that there was something fundamentally different about her today, for surely the image of her—brilliant, exotic, wilful—which he had carried with him since the previous afternoon could not have been entirely the creation of his own infatuated imagination.

'Did you have a good party last night? I suppose you got back very late.'

'Party? Oh, yes, it was great fun.'

One might have supposed she had forgotten all about it!

The businessmen were talking particularly loudly, recalling almost in chorus a meeting at which C. R. had apparently not merely humbled but demolished an unfortunate adversary.

'Are you angry with me?' Bateman asked her.

She looked at him in apparent surprise.

'I did telephone but you weren't in. It was just by chance I was in that café again when you came out of the bookshop. I wasn't expecting to see you at all, I wasn't waiting for you, I wasn't'—he smiled faintly to show the absurdity of such a notion—'wasn't spying on you.'

And she had given him then—he thought for the first time since they had met—a keen and concentrated scrutiny.

'Spying on me! What would you spy on me for?'

'But I said: no, I wasn't,' Bateman put in hastily.

'Only, of course, I was so glad to see you.'

'Were you?' the girl said, looking away again, and again uninterested.

He had thought that when they had finished lunch she would make an excuse to leave him as quickly as possible.

But she said: 'No, I've nothing to do.'

'Where would you like to go then?'

'I don't mind. I don't mind.'

'We could go to a cinema.'

'No, not a cinema. I don't want to,' she said.

The afternoon shoppers and people returning to work divided around them; the traffic roared past. Bateman had been completely at a loss. Then on the destination-board of one of the passing buses he saw a place-name which was associated in his mind with the country, with verdure, water—all that which the busy city street was not. He had put it to her.

'All right, I don't mind,' she had said.

And that was how it was they came to be standing here, at the edge of the wood, which—if one ignored the flattened undergrowth, the well-worn paths, the twists and trails of paper—could be taken for a real wood, even the beginnings of a forest, and not, as it was, merely an adjunct of the park in which the harassed city-dwellers obtained an illusion of their release.

She took his hand and dragged him.

'Come on, come on.'

It had begun to get better on the bus. They had sat on one of the front seats on the upper deck, at first not speaking very much.

It was almost like coming out of an anæsthetic—and she should know all about that, shouldn't she? There was the same sense of the restoration of one's identity, and at the same time the physical world became concrete again, resumed its proper dimensions. So, simultaneously, the memory of what had happened that morning began to take on an unreal, dream-like quality. Although—as after an operation—she was no longer quite the same person, the human urge for continuity and stability (however odd a word that is to use in connection with Veronica Barclay!) made her cling to the personality with which she was familiar.

The spring sunlight gilded the well-known bricks and concrete and asphalt; the faceless, nameless, unidentifiable walkers on the pavements below them offered the



reassurance of old companions. Even the vibrations and jerkings of the bus assumed the smooth rhythm of the habitual.

'Did I tell you,' Veronica said, 'that when I was a child, a girl from eleven to seventeen, I was in hospital for six years? I had a tubercular leg, and they thought I'd never walk properly ever. It was my father who was most upset about it, he was a great hunting man, and he wanted me . . .'

Truth and fantasy inextricably intermingled, she clung—although she would never be quite the same again—to the lifebuoy of the self which she knew.

'I am awful,' she had said, just before they got off the bus. 'I am always terrible about things like that. I haven't thanked you for my lunch.'

'I'm afraid that you . . .' he began.

'I haven't had a lunch like that for, oh, I don't know how long, these days in my straitened circumstances, ha-ha.'

Later, as they had been walking around the perimeter of the deserted pond, or lake as it was called, she had been struck by some memory, something lovely seen or dreamed in the past, a pang of sorrow for that which was lost.

'Water,' she said. 'Isn't there something beautiful, no, I don't mean just beautiful—sad, peaceful about . . .'

Then she had gone on: 'Did I tell you how once I was walking by the river at home, and there just in front of me, it had been caught up in the branches of a willow tree, was a girl's body? It had long yellow hair, all stretched out and muddy, and her body was so white. They said at the inquest that she had thrown herself into the river because she wasn't married and she'd had a baby, and her father wouldn't let her keep it.'

'Did you have to give evidence at the inquest?' he asked.

'What? Oh yes, of course.'

They had walked on a little further when she asked him:

'James, how old are you?'

'I'm thirty-eight,' he replied. 'How old are you?'

Yes, she would have thought: about forty, not quite perhaps. She preferred what she called older men.

'How old do you think I am? No one ever guesses right. I'm deceptive, very deceptive.'

'I should say about twenty-three.'

'How clever of you! You're right, exactly right. How could you tell, because no one ever does? They all think . . .'

'It was just a guess,' he said.

'Let me try guessing, guessing what you do, because you never told me.' She had taken his arm. 'You're some sort of an engineer?'

'No,' he said.

'An accountant?'

'No.'

'A surveyor? Am I getting warm?'

'Not very,' he said.

'Then tell me.'

He said: 'I'm a sort of photographer. And you're working at that bookshop, are you?'

'No,' she said, 'no. Whatever makes you think?'

'I just thought,' he said.

Veronica said: 'It's funny the things that happen to me. There was that girl in the river, and then I was walking in a wood once, and right in front of me, from right behind a tree in the middle of the path a naked man appeared. That was, oh, I don't know how long ago, but I can remember now exactly what he said, I don't think I'll ever forget it. He said: "Were you looking for me, darling?"'

'And I was just frozen. But then when he came towards me I ran and ran and ran. I wonder sometimes if things like that happen to other girls, or whether it's just me.'

It was not only that she liked—as the phrase has it—to dramatize herself; it was something deeper than that: she needed the conditions of drama as a verification of her own existence. And her acquaintances had to be shaped to fit into the same dramatic pattern.

'Tell me about yourself, James. You haven't told me anything.'

That which he actually told her was bare and fragmentary, but from it she was able to construct the image—and who is to say that it was so far removed from the truth?—of a romantic star-crossed figure, broken on the wheel of love, whom only a woman's tenderness could restore.

'What a terrible, what an awful thing!' she said. 'What a terrible woman she must have been! It wouldn't be a wonder if after all that you didn't, you never wanted anything to do with girls again. But it can't be like that, can it, or you wouldn't be here with me? But it must have made you dreadfully cynical.'

They had been walking for the better part of an hour. The sunlight now was thin and unwarming.

Occasionally, some little while after one has come out of an anæsthetic there is an effect of delayed intoxication, a sense of freedom and carefree well-being. Veronica suddenly, standing there at the edge of the sparse wood, felt a wave of happiness and release.

She took his hand and dragged him.

'Come on, come on,' she said.

## Chapter 4

THE bookseller's warning affected them all in different ways.

'Bertie was the first to speak. 'Well, it wasn't Dodds,' he said. 'It certainly wasn't Dodds. I haven't mentioned a word to a soul, I swear it.'

The suggestion of an accusation, although not levelled directly against himself, had revived that basic feeling of insecurity which underlaid his bluffness, his exuberance, his amorous successes. It released unpleasant memories of his bullied childhood, his blushing, timorous adolescence, all the uncertainties, in fact, which had crippled him until the time he had first encountered the bookseller and had acquired a relative confidence through his present prodigious role.

'I only wish I knew the bastard who.'

They were all in the office, to which the bookseller had directed them after a session in the studio, he at his desk, the others grouped around him like staff officers, casual but alert, around their dynamic general. His tone had been grave but not tragic, appropriate to the analysis of a disappointing set-back but placing it in its proper perspective relative to the campaign as a whole.

'If someone grassed, I'd like to get my hands on him.'

Bertie glared around him, although the bookseller had not, in fact, implied that any of those now present bore responsibility for the renewed police enquiries of which he had warned them.

Louise said nothing but she was similarly disturbed. To her the activities of the studio and her part in them had—although she did not identify her pleasure in these terms—something of the child-like innocence, the lascivious purity of nymphs and fauns at play. At no time had they aroused any sensations of guilt.

Now, with the bookseller's references to the police and the need for secrecy and dissimulation, something furtive

had entered into it, a sinister element. She thought of her husband, she thought of her home, and they both seemed threatened. It was as if it had been revealed that some animal, or a snake, say, which she had taken in and petted had all the time unknown held poison in its fangs.

Veronica also kept silent, moving her fingers, twisting a bracelet around her slender wrist.

There had never—she knew and was able now to admit to herself—been any doubt that she would return to the bookshop and the studio after that first occasion. But in her case—unlike that of Louise—fascination was continuously balanced by a nervous excitement and apprehension. It was probably this which, even in the space of a few weeks, had produced a slight but noticeable change in her appearance: she had become thinner generally and the effect in her face was to have made it sharper and more mature, reducing the impression of shallowness.

Perhaps, in a way, she welcomed the possibilities of danger, of a further excitement, which the bookseller's words had suggested. She kept her gaze fixed avidly upon him, her lips parted.

Webber, the photographer, said: 'How do you know they're on to us, Sammy?'

The reactions of all the others might quite easily have been interpreted by any perceptive observer—by the bookseller himself, for instance—but it was hard to tell what Webber thought or felt. Shabby, vulpine, grey, crouched forward in his chair so that his head was over his knees, perpetual cigarette dangling, he created a mechanical, non-human effect, as if he were merely an attachment to his own camera which recorded the incredible intimacies of the studio and remained uninvolved.

'Have they been round here?' It was an effort for him to utter a sentence before his words were consumed by a cough.

'I have my private sources of information,' said the bookseller. 'But perhaps I did not make myself clear. It is not a matter of the police merely being aware of our activities. They have always been aware of them. At present, however—for what reason I do not know; it may be

that some development has given them hope of success—they are attempting to obtain what they call evidence to place before a court of law.’

‘So they must have got something to go on or else they wouldn’t have set about it like this.’

It was Julius who spoke. Knowing more than the others, he was also the more puzzled by what he thought to be not only the uncharacteristic nature of Sammy’s disclosures (normally he kept such problems to himself) but also by the—to Julius’s mind—needless veil of mystery and confusion which he had drawn over them.

‘Not necessarily,’ said the bookseller. ‘From time to time they are compelled to undertake some activity to justify their existence.’ He was smiling faintly now. ‘But it is not up to us to assist them. For the time being we should be particularly discreet.’

Was it by chance that, as he uttered the word ‘discreet’, his eyes rested upon Veronica?

The thin, cheap bracelet with the charms dangling fell to the floor as Veronica inadvertently unfastened the clasp. Since the bookseller’s initial warning to her she had been mindful of the need for discretion, but she was now uncomfortably aware that, although she had refrained from any explicit disclosures, she had from time to time, compelled by her innate weakness, dropped dark, mysterious hints.

‘We could give it a rest for a bit,’ Bertie said. ‘Until the heat’s off.’

‘I don’t think that that will be necessary,’ the bookseller replied. ‘The law fortunately demands proof of sale before the police can obtain a search warrant or take any other direct measures, and for the time being Julius and I are obliging only our trusted regular customers.’<sup>1</sup>

‘That’s all right,’ Bertie began, ‘but if . . .’ He broke off, uncertain of what he wanted to say. ‘You’re the boss, Sammy, you should know,’ he concluded.

Of them all, he was perhaps the most easily daunted by

<sup>1</sup> The events here described preceded the change in the law relating to obscene publications, which, among other matters, did away with the condition of proof of sale before a search warrant could be issued.

the bookseller: this derived mainly from a feeling that Sammy saw him, not as he was now, averagely confident, averagely happy, but as he had been before in the miserable days of his self-consciousness and fear. And as the bookseller had created the new Bertie, so, if he chose, he could re-create the old.

Now, as if touching a cherished talisman, averting the evil eye, Bertie repeated the catch-phrase he was in the habit of using at certain relevant moments:

'Who's for tennis?'

Veronica giggled.

Encouraged, Bertie followed up: 'Dodds is at the net, racket at the ready.'

For some of the others also the effect was as of a counter-charm, a kind of exorcism.

There was a response to it, but although Louise now refrained from making it aloud she said it to herself and her countenance lightened; already her apprehensions were beginning to fade. The bookseller himself smiled genially. Even Webber coughed in the way he had when—it would be going too far to say when something amused him—say, he had for an instant been able to look away from that which, whatever it was, within him that made him grey and frightened. Only Julius showed no reaction: wearing his habitual scowl, he was still perplexed by Sammy's approach.

'What's he up to?' he said to himself.

'Well, then,' said the bookseller, 'I think that is all. Until next week then. I will telephone you all in the normal way.' He stood up. 'The expression, I think, is: business as usual.'

'I don't get it,' said Julius. 'What were you up to?'

Despite his respect, he spoke in the off-hand and slightly belligerent manner which was characteristic of him.

'Well, it was mainly for the benefit of our new girl,' said the bookseller. 'But I thought that possibly a general call for discretion might be timely.' Without looking at Julius, he added: 'If things go smoothly for too long even the most scrupulous of us are liable to become imprudent.'

Julius did not flinch.

'Yes,' he said. 'I've been wanting to tell you. I should have realized you'd have known anyway. I let myself be provoked—she was such a silly little bitch. But you gave her the job anyway, so what difference did it make?'

'It is conceivable,' said the bookseller, 'that I gave her the job only because I knew that you had already told her what it entailed, and I thought it better that she should become directly involved.'

Julius looked at him intently.

'No,' said Sammy. 'My mind did not in fact work in that way. But it could have been so.'

'I'm sorry,' said Julius—words which did not come easily to him.

The bookseller said: 'As for my intentions just now, you see what my warning has brought forth in your case, the effect on your conscience. Perhaps it had an equally salutary effect upon the others.'

'Meaning that girl?'

'I said, upon the others.'

'What I can't understand,' said Julius, 'is why you don't just tell her, if now you're so certain about her boy friend. Or do you think she knows about him anyway?' This had only just occurred to him, and he added immediately: 'No, she's not capable.'

'Of such pretence? No, I am sure she does not know.'

'Well, then?'

'Could we be sure that she would appreciate that she owes her first loyalty to us?'

'She's in it too now,' Julius said.

'The police are not above compounding a felony in their gratitude to a witness who enables them to accomplish a successful prosecution.'

'Oh!' said Julius. 'Yes, I see.'

They were standing by the table in the shop itself, and speaking quietly. There was only one customer, who was looking at the paper-backs just inside the door.

'Have you ever been in prison, Julius?' the bookseller asked.

The unexpectedness of the question brought—for once



—a flicker of surprise to Julius's customarily frozen expression.

'Before I got out of the Army I had a spell in the cells,' he said. 'And for a couple of days when I was broke they locked me up at some buggy dump in Tunis.'

He did not say: why? He waited.

'It can be quite a rewarding experience,' said the bookseller. 'Like a retreat. One also learns a good deal about oneself in the restricted confines of a cell.'

'I didn't like being locked up,' said Julius. 'I think it was the worst thing that ever happened to me.'

'Yes,' said the bookseller. 'And for myself I think I have absorbed now all the wisdom of imprisonment. Yet one must not allow oneself to be intimidated. One must have pride in one's chosen mission—and faith. Which is to say that, although we shall be cautious, we shall not be deterred by the attentions of enquiring policemen . . . nor the threat of the cells.'

Webber had gone off alone, but the other three left the bookshop together. Veronica enjoyed being with Bertie and Louise: she felt a sense of comradeship—such a comradeship as she had tried to establish with her acquaintances of the public-house and club, but this had a greater depth and reality.

It was a grey monotone morning, with the sky seeming to have crowded in upon the roofs, creating a feeling of oppression.

When Bertie suggested going for a drink, Louise at first declined.

'Oh, do, Louise,' said Veronica, 'do come. Just for one, one very quick one.' She wanted to make it all last. 'Only one I promise you, because I've got to hurry too, there's someone important I've got to meet.'

Louise acceded. Bertie brought their drinks to a table. It was a large room, deserted except for a small group of men at the bar. The light was aqueous.

'I go on duty at three,' Bertie grumbled. 'I'm back on the split shift.'

Veronica knew only that he was employed in a minor capacity in an office concerned in some way with news and newspapers; but there was to her something remote and insubstantial about that side of his existence, as there was about Louise's life at home, as if they both assumed their full stature only within the encompassment of the bookshop and the props and mirrors of the studio.

'And after all my exertions.'

'Poor Bertie, sweet.'

She thought it marvellous that they should be sitting here like this, the three of them, after that which had gone before. If they only knew, those men standing at the bar, that . . . The sense of unity and purpose and of a secret superiority which enveloped her was similar to that which invigorates a revolutionary, proud among his confederates and contemptuous of the rest of the world.

'What did you make of this morning's lecture?' said Bertie.

He was addressing Louise, but Veronica rushed in: 'It was sense what he said, I mean about being careful.'

So she might have defended the leader of the cell against implied criticism or disaffection.

'I never said it wasn't. I must say, old Sammy never seems put out. Do you remember, Louise, the time when . . .'

Of course, she was only the new girl, but they were nice to her—they were all nice to her—except that boy Julius and that didn't matter because he wasn't really one of them. If those men only knew . . .

Veronica laughed with Bertie when he had completed his reminiscent anecdote, but she noticed with a pang that Louise did not even smile. It was not only that she wished her own sense of well-being to be shared: in Louise's thoughtfulness and silence Veronica felt a chill, a threat—a threat that the place which she had found herself, in which she was accepted, might suddenly disappear.

If anyone had asked her, she would have said, yes, she supposed, happiness was her aim—it was what everyone wanted, wasn't it?—but deep within herself she knew that it was not just happiness, unless happiness meant some-

thing unique for every person, that it was just a word for what everyone needed most: in her case acceptance and the self-identification that acceptance alone could bring.

'Louise,' she said, 'it will be all right. Mr. Samson, Sammy, said there was no need for us to worry, really to worry.'

'He could be wrong,' Louise said. 'Suppose he was wrong. Suppose we shouldn't all'—she made a small, irritated movement with her hand—'trust him like we do. Perhaps we're fools to. What do we know about him anyway?'

Veronica could think of nothing to say.

Louise went on: 'It would be in the papers, wouldn't it, apart from anything else? I mean apart from what they do to you. Supposing . . .'

It was easily to be realized that she was speaking, as it were, to exorcize her fears, as if by making it as bad as possible she could make it absurd.

'Supposing Sammy let us down. Perhaps he'd make a deal with them. Perhaps he'd tell them he had nothing to do with it, that we just happened to use his studio without him . . .'

'Rubbish, utter and complete!' Bertie said. He was evidently as shocked as Veronica, if not more so. 'And you know it, Louise.'

Louise emptied her glass and replaced it on the table. Simultaneously, by coincidence, the group of men at the bar started to disperse.

'I've got to go,' Louise said. 'The trouble is if you start thinking of all the things that could happen . . .'

Her expression had lost something of its strain. 'I suppose you'd never cross the road, let alone . . .'

'All right,' she said, even faintly smiling, 'racket at the ready. Service.'

In response to the familiar catch-phrase, Bertie said something extremely bawdy and they all laughed.

'We'll come with you.'

It was all right again, Veronica thought with relief; but something of the chill remained with her.

And still remained when—Louise having left them—she and Bertie stood together under a gross and overwhelming equestrian statue at the entrance to a small park, within which her fictitious admirer was supposed to be awaiting her.

‘You’d better not keep him waiting too long.’

‘Oh, let him wait,’ she said.

She felt suddenly terribly confused: there was a conflict between reality and her fantasy which she had not previously experienced.

‘That’s the way to treat them.’

There were two small children playing around the base of the statue: they seemed in a muddled way to symbolize a contrasted innocence—the innocence which somewhere she had lost. The sensation of the warmth of tears rising to her eyes was totally unfamiliar.

‘I suppose anyone would think what we’re doing is terrible.’

But that did not really relate to what disturbed her: even as she uttered the words she knew that she was merely making the *conventional* response and that the true cause of her dismay, her lost innocence, lay somewhere else.

‘Your boy friend, for example. Is that what you mean?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I suppose so.’ She had momentarily forgotten her invented important lover. ‘That’s what I mean.’

She brushed her hand across her face. ‘Goodbye, Bertie. See you next week.’

Then, walking alone under the dusty trees towards her non-existent appointment, it came to her for the first time and with an acute sense of shock how much she would suffer now if she were to lose her actual and existing lover, whom for the few weeks hitherto she had taken almost for granted, like any of the casual and insignificant lovers who had preceded him.

His image became confused with that of the children playing around the iron horse and with that dominating image of her hospital bed, but for an instant she had held it firmly within her mind and it had seemed then that perhaps at last she was in reach of what it would be

meaningless to call happiness: her acceptance, her proper place in the world.

Later in the day the heavy clouds had broken to release a mild spring rain.

Now, in the early evening, Bateman stood waiting under the shelter of a projecting glass roof upon which the rain fell in an unvaried rhythm. There were a few others sheltering beside him and a newspaper-seller who intermittently released harsh and unintelligible cries.

It had been raining too with the same gentle persistence an hour or two previously when Bateman had reported—in accordance with instructions—to the office of his superior. This was not his immediate superior but a man considerably higher in the hierarchy so that Bateman was unfamiliar with the room and its furnishings and noticed on entering the small differences that distinguished it from all the other very similar rooms in the building. At the same time, before the room's sole occupant, seated at his desk, had lifted his head Bateman had observed comprehensively the patterns of rain on the window behind the bowed head and, beneath it, his own report open on the desk-top. He knew that he was to be reproved.

Having invited Bateman to seat himself, his superior had again lowered his grizzled head as if studying the typewritten report, leaving Bateman to look at the uncurtained window and the shifting patterns of rain.

The superintendent looked up. 'And that's all?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You seem to have spent a good deal of time, and nothing to show for it.'

To that he had not replied. It was a familiar situation: the logical consequence of a system which demanded concrete results, in the absence of which evidence of effort and of diligence (Bateman was, in fact, diligent and competent in his trade) was insufficient to avert formal censure. So one did not volunteer excuses, confining oneself at the most to refuting any direct allegations of indiscretion or negligence.

'Why did it go wrong?'

'I don't know,' Bateman said. 'I suppose he must have spotted me, or he's just careful with any strangers. He's a smooth operator.' He thought a moment and added with considered daring: 'We've tried before, sir, haven't we, and we didn't do any better then? When they wouldn't dish out the goods—it's in my report—all I could do was keep observation.'

'That didn't get you very far either.'

In a certain sense the reproof was real enough, a failure was being marked and would be held against him; but in another sense it was academic, the grey-haired man at the desk playing the part which the system demanded of him, without attempting to assert his personal condemnation of Bateman's conduct.

Lacking a strongly developed sense of ambition, Bateman had in the past accepted such interviews as being among the inevitable hazards of his occupation; confident in his own integrity, he could suffer them without permitting himself to become either apprehensive or downcast. And it would have been the same on this occasion, except—except, he thought now, as the newspaper-seller let out another discordant cry and a woman, carelessly shaking her umbrella, spattered his feet—that he was no longer supported by his integrity: the conscious omissions in his report, amounting to deception, had rendered him corrupt and vulnerable.

So that, retracing the course of the interview in his mind, he sought traps in the superintendent's questions and was fearful of the incriminatory evasions of his own answers.

'You don't think he's suspending activities for a bit because he knows we're watching him?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Or he's getting rid of the stuff somewhere else?'

'Don't know, sir. It could be.'

Had the superintendent begun to display signs of impatience?

'Well, what about this studio? You haven't got on to that side of it either.'

'No, sir.'

'The tip-off was strong enough. But he couldn't do it on his own, could he? You never saw anyone who . . .'

'No, sir. It's in my report. There were no callers who seemed . . .'

'No women or girls?'

'No, sir.'

That was his only direct lie, and, recalling it now, he re-experienced the guilt and apprehension he had felt then although his answer had apparently been accepted without doubt.

There had been another bad moment: pushing aside the report and leaning back in finality, the superintendent had said: 'Well, Bateman, it doesn't seem much use you going on with it. I'm taking you off the job.'

It was only what he had expected.

'You agree?'

The question was rhetorical.

'Yes, sir.'

He had transferred his weight to his feet, preparatory to rising.

'Sir, will you be . . .?'—he was aware that he was making a mistake but it was too late to stop—'Are you going to put someone else on to it?'

It had been a cardinal mistake, a flagrant violation of protocol, accepted discipline, its enormity immediately marked by the reaction of his superior, who had for the first time shown a personal, as opposed to an official, displeasure.

And suspicion? It seemed so to Bateman now—the rain was beginning at last to slacken and some of the people beside him who had been only sheltering were preparing to brave it—as he saw again the look of surprise on the heavy, battered face of the man at the desk and the faint suffusion of anger.

He had not even answered.

'Right, Bateman. That will be all.'

'Yes, sir.'

He saw her coming—still quite a considerable distance away, poised precariously to dart between the heavy,

splashing traffic. She was wearing a thin and inappropriate suit, without a mackintosh or umbrella to protect her. And the fear of his superior's suspicion like a fuse charged a larger fear: that the impervious protective shell which he had built up since the years of his marriage was now insidiously threatened.

'Veronica had got quite wet; he could see the dark patches on her shoulders and faintly smell the damp material. She apologized for being late, offering a complicated explanation which he could not follow.

In fact, he made no attempt to follow it. He had by now grown accustomed to the contradictions which continually revealed themselves in her conversation, the fantastic element; but he closed his mind to them, ignoring them, or accepting them as one accepts a child's fantasies, almost unconsciously, and it was virtually with relief that he had abandoned the attempt to place her, either in the past or in the present, the attempt to read her biography.

Besides, she still daunted him, and then, to add to his uncertainty and the false basis of their relationship, there were the lies which he was compelled to tell to her.

'You look tired, sweet. Have you had a hard day?' She had her arm in his and pressed close against him.

'So-so.'

'What have you been doing?'

'The usual dreary round.'

Fortunately, she seldom pursued such enquiries, not even pretending to the interest which most women pretend to in their men's vocational activities.

He felt compelled to elaborate. 'In the dark-room mostly.' Then to deflect her: 'And you?'

'Oh, nothing. Where shall we go?'

'I thought, back to my place.'

'Not tonight,' she said. She seemed to hesitate. 'Why don't we go to my local?'

She had suggested this frequently before, but Bateman had always resisted it.

'Because I want to show you off to all the gang, sweet, because I've told them all about you and if they don't



meet you soon they'll be thinking you're just a figment and I haven't got a real lover.'

On this occasion he assented from more than anything else a kind of weariness, a reaction from that afternoon's interview.

It was not from fear of being identified personally that he had avoided this before, but because he knew that men like himself could seldom conceal their occupation from the trained eyes of barmen.

'Benny, this is James. James, this is Benny,' Veronica said.

The barman, a brisk-looking man, middle-aged, gave him an impassive but not unfriendly nod.

'He's my beau. I was telling you.'

Ordering their drinks, Bateman asked the barman if he would have one too, but he declined.

'Benny, what's wrong with you tonight? Are you on the wagon?' Veronica said. 'This I've never seen before.'

The barman merely smiled vaguely and went round into the other bar. In a moment or two the landlord came in, carefully not looking at Bateman.

'Hello, dear,' he said familiarly to Veronica.

Veronica said, 'Good evening.'

Bateman suddenly felt aware of his weariness again, and with it self-distaste—for all the shifts and contrivances of living.

Thinking still of his interview, he was not really listening to what the landlord was saying, until unexpectedly he saw a deep blush spread over Veronica's face and throat, and then he heard the landlord's rasping voice, as it were, retrospectively.

'You haven't caught a chill yet then? You want to watch out for the draughts.'

The words seemed innocent enough—a reference, Bateman thought, to Veronica's damp state: he could still see the dark patches on the shoulders of her jacket—but there could be no mistaking the intensity and pain of her embarrassment. The landlord went back into the other bar.

Veronica held a hand against her face. 'Let's sit down.'

They went to a table next to that occupied by an elderly man reading a newspaper.

Bateman said something unimportant.

Veronica suddenly seized his hand; hers was very warm.

'I suppose you wonder what that was all about.' She was looking away from him. 'That crack he made. Oh, that man, he's a pig, a blasted pig. You're so good, James,' she went on. 'You're so good to me. You never ask me. And what the hell's it got to do with him how I earn my living?'

She paused, and he had a presentiment of what was to come so that his distaste and tiredness were intensified.

'It doesn't matter,' he said.

'You know—I've told you—how I've had all sorts of jobs, because I wasn't trained, I even type with two fingers, spending all that time in hospital. But I haven't told you what I'm doing now, have I, because you've never asked? I didn't tell him either, I wouldn't tell him anything, but someone must have, perhaps Benny—though I wouldn't think so—or one of the gang.'

She dropped his hand, and he saw her tongue come out, darting over her lower lip, and her face take on an expression which might most accurately be described as one of slyness.

'You see, I'm modelling for a photographer. That's what he meant, that pig, about getting cold and not standing in draughts, for . . . well, you're a photographer too: you never told me, do you take pictures of girls?'

She paused again and smiled—slyly still, but also (or so it seemed) with something of bravado and delight.

'I mean, posing without much on. Sometimes in the—what do they say?—altogether.'

Bateman had not been himself when he had first encountered her, and perhaps he had not been since. That at any rate would provide a partial explanation for the curious mental dichotomy he had subsequently achieved. It is difficult to define it; certainly he could not have explained it satisfactorily to himself. In essence it amounted to this: that on one level, despite the watch he had main-

tained and his knowledge of the activities of Samson (or Samuels), despite too the arid distrust which his occupation engendered, he had contrived within his own mind to detach Veronica from the ambience of the bookshop and of his professional enquiries, almost to the point of explicit acquittal. He had been able to ignore the inconvenient and suggestive facts which obtruded themselves on the other level, the level of impersonality; but now this would be possible no longer. She had made her avowal, even if—and Bateman had more than an inkling of it—incompletely, shattering the division he had erected and compelling him to love with open eyes.

‘You don’t mind, do you? You don’t mind, do you, sweet? I’m afraid I told you some stories but, you see, I didn’t know you well enough, I didn’t know how you’d . . . I suppose I felt shy.’

She appeared to try to simulate a shyness in her expression, but it was overborne by the delight and the bravado.

‘I didn’t want to lose you. I might have frightened you off.’

Why had she been so eager that he should come to her local and meet ‘the gang’? Perhaps unconsciously she had wished to be forced into her disclosure.

He had never before known her so animated. In a little while some of her acquaintances came in and Veronica and Bateman joined them at the bar. She was drinking more than he had known her to drink before, but this seemed an effect of her animation rather than the cause of it.

Soon he ceased to think of what she had told him or of the rather different images which his own knowledge had created from her confession—if that were what it should be called. He was dazzled again by her brilliance, beside which he felt dull, colourless, weary. The possibility of happiness seemed to be sliding away from him; the world was again unjust.

Later, piling into two cars, they all went to a club—doubtless the club of which she had spoken to him, although he would never have recognized it from her

lyrical description. Dazzled as he was, it was only by Veronica; he assessed their surroundings with a sober, sceptical eye, and their companions also, 'the gang', bringing an almost puritanical judgment to bear upon their raffishness and bohemian pretensions. /

Despite his distaste, he felt no anger or resentment against Veronica, only a regret that her generosity, her vivacity and her innocence made her lend herself to that which was so inferior.

It was inevitable that sometimes she should be swept away from him. For one thing, Bateman did not dance, and in the club on three or four occasions she was taken to spin or shuffle over the small space in the centre of the room.

'You don't mind, do you, sweet? When I feel like this I love to dance. For so long I never danced—you know, don't you?'

He had little to say to the others, except that he found an elderly and somewhat effeminate man who—most improbably—shared his interest in Association football.

Later, carrying bottles, they all went back to the house of one of the women—a plump, Italianate woman, heavy with combs and bracelets, whose name was Mimi. The party was held in a large studio-type room, only dimly lit by a shaded standard-lamp at one end.

Bateman had surrendered: he had given up hope of persuading Veronica to depart; he had stopped thinking about the interview of the afternoon or of the bookshop and Veronica's involvement with its activities. What had to happen would happen; even his weariness and depression were themselves vitiated by the futility of his surroundings and his own impotence.

He was sitting, uncomfortably perched on the end of a couch, empty glass in hand, again talking football with the effeminate enthusiast, when he became aware that another man had seated himself just behind them, back to back with Bateman so that he could not turn to observe him even when he felt that the newcomer was concentrating his attention upon them. Veronica was dancing.

'Let us see,' said Bateman's companion, 'if further supplies of alcohol are to be obtained.'

As he got up, so Bateman was able to shift himself, turning to look at the man who had been sitting behind him.

Their faces were only inches apart. The other man smiled wolfishly.

'Hullo, sport,' he said. 'I thought I recognized you.'  
It was the bookseller's assistant.

## Chapter 5

JULIUS shared an apartment with a Jamaican who worked in a large hotel. It was about three o'clock when Julius came home and Princeton was in bed asleep. As he paid the larger part of their rent the Jamaican occupied the only bed; a couch with the springs protruding served for Julius.

When he switched on the light, the Jamaican turned over and opened his eyes.

'You, Ju?'

'All right, boy. Go to sleep,' Julius said.

Although he was accustomed to late hours and was wide-awake, he felt disinclined for conversation. He removed his jacket and tie.

There was a bathroom in the apartment which they used also as a kitchen. He went in there and poured himself a glass of milk, sitting on a straight-backed wooden chair and putting his feet upon the bath.

He had not stayed long at the party after speaking to the man to whom in his own mind he still referred as 'that comedian'. Departing as inconspicuously as he had arrived (with the exception of Veronica, his only close acquaintance there was a young soldier who was a lover of the munificent Mimi's), he had walked home deviously—several miles through the streets of the night city which he knew so well. He was never more at home than at this time, among the other nightwalkers; the various activities of the dark streets, which to one unacquainted with them seem unfathomably mysterious, held no secrets for him and in the half-seen and furtive configurations of the shadows he found the reassurance of the tried and familiar.

He had stopped briefly at a coffee-stall, where he knew one or two among the other customers, but then, as now, he had not wanted to talk and remained on the outskirts, alert, aloof and totally self-contained.

Yet a splinter of discontent or irritation, invisible but acute, was already working its way towards the surface.

He had ignored it then for, in his pride, Julius guarded his equanimity like a miser his purse; but now, jack-knifed between chair and bath, the half-emptied glass of milk on the deal table beside him, he was prepared to examine it, to attempt to extract the infectious splinter.

He had not come well out of his encounter with that comedian. Skilled at mockery and malice, Julius had adopted his most provocative method of derision, veiled by a smile but unmistakable in intent; only, on this occasion its victim had seemed unaware of or utterly indifferent to his polite and contemptuous insults. It was as if he had been firing his shots at a man totally contained in a bullet-proof armour.

Finally, with some muttered remark which had seemed neither to be hostile in intent nor apprehensive but only vastly indifferent, the comedian had got up and left him. Watching him across the dim, crowded room to where that lunatic girl had been standing by the record-player, Julius had only just managed to restrain himself from shouting out the direct insult which would have revealed his knowledge of the other's identity.

At the thought of this narrowly averted indiscretion, which he would have had to confess to Sammy, Julius grimaced. Yet it was not this, nor even his failure to have made effective and apparent his contempt, which now caused the unaccustomed disquietude. He saw again the bulky, middle-aged and somehow proletarian shape of the man squeezing his way among the dancers across the room in which he was so obtrusively out of place and felt again the emotion which he had felt then, watching him, a personal and involved emotion—a dislike which, passionate and irrational, was as contemptible as affection.

For Julius, the foundling, the baby left literally on the steps of the church, had dispensed with the luxury of hatred, as with that of love, at least since when at the age of sixteen he had with one blow expunged the years of hatred, the blow, the wielded bronze ornament, having shattered in a mince of blood and splintered bone the jaw-bone of the hated foster-father.

Julius emptied the glass of milk. He heard Princeton

turn in his bed and make some indistinct noise in his throat. It came to him then suddenly—with that sense of acute lucidity which prevails in the morning's early hours—that what he disliked Bateman for was his need of happiness, which to Julius seemed a vulgar weakness.

He had been sitting so close to him that even in the dim light of the studio he had been able to see the grey spikes among the close-cropped hair on his neck, and he had watched with derision the pathetic manner in which he had turned his head to follow the blatant movements of the girl dancing extravagantly about the room. He had felt the man's need of her as something tangible, weak and despicable, yet, in an obscure manner, threatening to himself, Julius.

Now he dismissed that threat; it was inconceivable that the comedian should ever prove an effective adversary of Sammy. And in what other manner could his pale longing impinge upon Julius's inviolability?

He got up and opened the narrow window by the side of the wash-basin. He leant out. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he could see the blue-black roofs of the houses opposite beyond the sour neglected garden. There was a glow or a stain in the sky towards the city's centre. He heard the rumble of a train. From somewhere streets away there came a thin scream which could have been made by a woman or a cat or a night-bird.

It was a world in which he could move freely—anonymous, untrammelled. He felt himself, like an eagle, hovering remote above it. He was filled with a cold elation.



## Chapter 6

THROUGHOUT the week following the day of the book-seller's warning Louise had been troubled in her mind. A sensible, unbrooding woman, whose domestic preoccupations allowed her little time for repining, she found nevertheless that all manner of small incidents would serve to remind her of the newly-recognized dangers of her situation.

For example: it was her habit after lunch on most weekdays (her husband had his meal at the school) to 'put her feet up' and read a popular newspaper. This printed daily horoscopes which she sometimes read and sometimes ignored. As it happened, her horoscope—she was born under the sign of Cancer the Crab, under the dominion of the Moon, the universal Mother, with the fruit and flowers belonging to her—the day after the studio session read as follows:

*Making ends meet will need extra thought. An inspiration will get you unusually good value. Home-life will experience rewards after a set-back. But beware of being let down from an unexpected quarter.*

She was not superstitious—or no more so than many women who from time to time glance at their horoscopes with a mixture of scepticism, amusement and curiosity. On that occasion, however, the final sentence was so appropriate to her existing fears that when she read it she experienced a cold shock, as if she had read in one of the adjoining news columns of an event that rendered inevitable some great personal calamity.

On the following days she took up the paper as soon as her husband had left the house in the morning and turned straight to the horoscopes, chiding herself for doing so and uttering words of disbelief under her breath, yet feeling a constriction in her throat and a tremulous eagerness.

Approaching them in this manner, she ignored the naïve prophecies of good fortune, and her mind translated

the innocuously phrased cautions into forbidding threats of disaster.

*Avoid transactions that may lead to disappointment.*

*An arrangement agreed on will not work smoothly,*

*A business venture might be unrewarding.*

*A set-back at work will bring complications at home.*

One effect of her partial submission to superstition was that she felt the need to make propitiatory gestures. These took the form of such small gratuitous acts of goodness as putting out bread for birds, offering to baby-sit for a neighbour whom she rather disliked and writing letters to ignored relatives; but above all she felt, as she had never done before, a sense of guilt regarding her husband which led to displays of unwonted and exaggerated affection.

She was nervous and ill at ease. A taciturn and remote man, with a mind far more complicated than that of Louise, her husband lacked the intuitive gifts which might have enabled him to respond to her swift changes of mood. The consequence was that, her impulse to tenderness thwarted, Louise felt the more guilt and became oversensitive and liable to outbursts of temper.

During the week they had a number of petty arguments, the more disturbing because of their unfamiliarity, so that neither Louise nor her husband knew how to dismiss them, and they would be succeeded by periods of coldness and estrangement.

Her household duties from which normally she derived such satisfaction became irksome to her. She spent one afternoon assessing their debts, the mortgage and hire-purchase repayments, and made of them a monstrous burden which, it seemed, would bow their backs until the end of their days. She broke a piece of china, one of their more valuable possessions. A kind of blight, a contamination had taken the colour out of her life. Even the normal processes of her body were upset.

It was at the end of the week that her husband, returning from school, brought two of his pupils home with him.

Louise had not been feeling well and after lunch she had partly undressed and had gone to bed. Hearing her husband unlocking the door and having earlier once again

determined to demonstrate her affection for him, she had promptly run downstairs, scantily dressed . . . to be confronted in the hall by two gawky adolescent boys. Taken by surprise, she had not beaten an instant retreat, but remained standing there, saying to her husband the words she had already planned to say to him, until, noting his and the boys' embarrassment, she had re-collected herself and abruptly entered the nearest room, slamming the door.

From this incident there developed a quarrel as bitter as any in their married life.

She had returned to the bedroom and remained there all the time the boys were still in the house, magnifying the encounter in her mind, imagining a probably unfounded prurience in the boys' regard and feeling an obscure sense of shame. With this there had existed a feeling of resentment against her husband for having created the situation. The storm broke when he, having seen the boys off, came into the bedroom and, before she could utter her remonstrations, had himself started mildly to reproach her for her carelessness in appearing so inadequately clad.

(Louise's husband does not play a large part in this story, but perhaps it is necessary here to provide a brief account of his character to explain the course of this futile but lacerating quarrel. An introverted and austere man by nature, he yet had a high intellectual respect for those spontaneous qualities which he himself lacked: the warm, generous sensual graces, for which he loved his wife—after his fashion, as all men love. Knowing himself to be deficient in what he believed to be the most valuable human qualities, he found compensation in an absorbed dedication to his profession. Ill-adapted as he was for the more gregarious social pastimes, his sole relaxation was fishing.)

They were both superficially indignant, both at bottom ashamed, their shame adding venom to their indignation.

'It doesn't matter to you how *I* felt,' Louise cried. 'No, it's the boys, always the boys, the darling boys. "What will they say back at school tomorrow?"' She had mimicked her husband's careful enunciation.

'What do I care what they say back at school? If they

saw Crummy Crampton's wife in her panties. The bloody boys are all you care for.'

Because she had attacked him on the subject of the school, his work, he had prolonged his opposition for longer than he would otherwise have done.

She cut into his defence. 'Oh, it's fine being a school-master, fine. But it didn't buy this house, did it? Or the furniture . . . I had to make the money for that, didn't I?'

After a while he no longer reproached her, but with a gentle pedantry, which was the more infuriating, attempted to defend himself by pointing out the grosser illogicalities in her tirade.

She picked up a garment from the bed and threw it blindly on the floor. She knew she looked ugly.

'And you want us to have children. What do you think would happen to all this if I had to stay home all the day? And your children! Do you think I want to have your children?'

She was approaching hysteria.

'Can't you say anything?'

He had gone out of the room then and she had been left standing there, the screwed-up garment on the floor creating the effect of a wilder disorder than in fact existed; and she could still see him, feel him, standing before her, bewildered, pathetic, deeply hurt. But perhaps because of her sense of shame, she had not been able to go to him.

She prepared his meal and put it on the table, telling him it was ready in a careful neutral voice.

'I'm going out for a little while.'

The suburban evening was yellow and dusty, vivid like a tropical animal, and shrill with the cries of children weaving arabesques with their bicycles, the clatter of lawn-mowers, mechanical music from open windows.

A man who knew her, tending roses in his garden, spoke as she passed, and all that night was to feel a vague distress wondering how he had so offended her that she should not have acknowledged him.

On a corner stood three young foreign girls, chattering loudly in an incomprehensible tongue. She imagined the

man whom she had left, sitting at the table over the meal prepared from a formal sense of duty or habit. Without the accustomed bag, her hands seemed empty, and she screwed her fingers tightly in desperation, remembering the things she had said.

After a while she came to some scrubby green fields, only intermittently mortified by the red rash of brick which was the suburb's token. She was walking along a flat, treeless lane, beside which ran a shallow stream, tin and refuse cluttered. It was a landscape which she had loved, its comfort and its mediocrity the symbol of that which she had achieved, her escape from the harsh, demoniac steel town of her upbringing.

'I must give it up.' She said it aloud.

The stream petered out into a pond, largely dried up, with rolls of mud protruding above the greasy water like basking animals. A young boy, cheerfully grubby, sat on a fallen tree trunk fishing with an improvised rod made from a cane and a length of string. He looked at Louise in a friendly way, as if he would have been pleased to reply to her if she could have thought of anything to say.

She was reminded again—poignantly—of her husband, with his passion for fishing, and then, for no particular reason, she started to think of an occasion when, a girl of sixteen or seventeen, plump, spuriously sophisticated, she had been taken by her parents on holiday to a seaside town: the town in which she had met Margaret.

Margaret was a little older than Louise had been, not so good-looking, but possessed of an exciting, an almost intimidating vivacity. Her father, a widower, was a cotton broker. She had only left school that summer, while Louise had for some two years been working in a coal merchant's office. Yet the elder girl had had a more adult grasp on life's pleasures.

For that fortnight they went everywhere together: on the beach and to the swimming pool, to the dances on the pier and afterwards, sometimes with two boys, sometimes with more, to the dark enchanted shelters on the seafront, fairy lights pinpointing their roofs.

On the last three nights of the holiday Louise had slept

at the beach cottage which Margaret's father had rented. The two girls had shared a bedroom and in the darkness talked for hours while the sea sucked and sang a stone's throw from their open windows.

They exchanged addresses and wrote to each other. It was about three months later that Margaret—by then employed by an acquaintance of her father, an importer, who had already once allowed her to accompany him on a trip to Paris—had come to visit Louise.

Even now, thinking of it, the adult Louise winced with chagrin. It had been disastrous. The social barriers, invisible or ignored at the informal seaside, had loomed huge and insurmountable.

Rain had kept them in the house, where Louise's mother had tried to overcome her sense of intimidation with an uneasy and painful jocularity. Louise, herself, with a cold despair had to recognize the failure.

When the rain eased off they went for a walk along the canal bank. Had they perhaps passed a boy fishing with a rod made of cane and a length of string?

None of the former intimacy had been recaptured. They had said everything there was to be said and had fallen into silence. Suddenly Margaret had halted and had taken Louise by the hand.

'Lou, why don't you come and work at my office? My boss will give you a job if Daddy asks him. You could live with us.'

Years later Louise was able to recognize the measure of her friend's generosity. Then, however—two coal barges were sluggishly negotiating a turn in the canal—she had felt desperately affronted. True, for a moment she was tempted to accept, but only as an act of revenge.

She said merely, freeing her hand: 'I don't think I would like it.'

At that instant, however, a new resolution was born, a new attitude which was possibly to shape her entire adult existence.

'I must give it up,' she repeated, the boy and the pond already behind her.

Again she spoke to herself aloud. Of what was she

speaking? There did not seem to be a close connection, but she felt it, between one and the other invisible threads. Maybe then, as now, she had not known whether she had been resisting temptation or committing an act of betrayal.

She turned off the lane, taking a path which would bring her back to the suburb's centre, to the point from which she had started.

A few days later Margaret had written an over-polite 'thank-you' letter, to which Louise had not replied. They had never seen each other again.

## Chapter 7

BERTIE was trying to edge his way along the bar. He and his two companions were both standing: by shifting his position every so often he drew them along with him, like a liner its attendant tugs, so that all three were moving by fits and starts towards the far end, where the famous—or notorious—Clinton Bassett was holding court.

The bar was one used almost exclusively by newspapermen and those on the periphery of the trade—publicists, minor politicians and so on, a lawyer or two. Bertie had just come off duty. He did not usually have much social contact with his colleagues, but that day, feeling restive and having a blank evening in front of him, he had prevailed on two of them to come for a drink.

He had rather regretted it, even while they were drinking their first beers, for he found them both, with their conversation limited to office shop, boring and unworthy of himself and his mood. Because he was in a curious mood: for a few days he had been in a state of suppressed excitement, a kind of psychological over-training, as if, like an athlete, he had prepared himself for some important test, only for the event to be indefinitely and mysteriously postponed. In the bar, impatient, almost aggressive, he alternated between boastfulness and a contemptuous inattention.

Then the famous man came in. He had paused just within the doorway, like the star actor making his first entrance; as he made his way down the length of the bar he acknowledged the greetings of several acquaintances and, passing Bertie, gave him a nod.

'Hallo, Clinton.' But Bertie only uttered the Christian name after he had walked out of earshot.

Their acquaintanceship was minimal: Bertie had been drinking in a club with a party of journalists; then, as now, the famous man had entered and had for a while joined their group. Doubtless, he vaguely remembered Bertie's face.



A good memory for faces would be an occupational necessity for him. He was, after all, a journalist and had been for some thirty years. His fame (or notoriety) was, however, of relatively recent origin. A formerly staid newspaper had changed its policy under new management to one of sensationalism, and Clinton Bassett, given charge of a daily column, had become the paper's principal muck-raker.

Two novel features had given his column—headed each day by the same sinister cut-out photograph of his sharp-nosed face, mackintosh collar turned up, hat-brim pulled down—its remarkable appeal: in the first place it presented its scandals almost without hypocritical moral censure, clinically in fact, like a detective agency's reports; in the second, he and the men who worked directly to him found their material not in the customary café-society, where scandalous publicity is more desired than resented, but in the secretive world of true criminality and the yet more secretive world of the illicit or corrupt masked as the respectable.

A quite serious attack upon his person, a number of libel actions and criminal proceedings following his column's revelations had added to his renown. It should be said, however, that his fame *personally*, as opposed to a name or a photograph at the top of a newspaper column, was of that spurious metropolitan type, limited to a dim half-world of a few square miles of grimy city streets.

That as it may be, he was in this particular bar a lion. The well-educated, ambitious young men kept glancing towards the corner, where, with two others of about the same age as himself—one a newspaper executive, the other a barrister—he was steadily drinking gin and tonic water. From time to time someone else would briefly join them and depart, or remain just outside their small circle.

And Bertie with his two companions was all the time edging that way.

'Old Clinton's lashing it back tonight,' Bertie said. 'But then his inside must be pickled with it.'

It was not really that he was a snob, the kind of man who will exaggerate his acquaintanceship with the great

in order to impress. No, it was more complicated than that: in a sense, it was himself whom Bertie was trying to impress. The new Bertie—the new, confident Bertie, the bookseller's creation—was the kind of person who ought to be on familiar terms with the great. And in the mood he was in tonight, strung taut, possessed by an intense latent exhilaration, he felt entirely capable of mixing upon equal terms with Clinton Bassett.

One of the men with him said he had to go, and Bertie made no attempt to detain him. He wished the other would also leave.

They had made their way to within a yard or two of Bassett's corner, separated from him by only one other group of drinkers, when a girl came into the bar by herself. She was quite young and very pretty in a somewhat contrived and stereotyped fashion. She went straight up to Bassett, who greeted her and bought her a drink, but then ignored her, continuing his conversation with his companions.

Since the beginning of his fame the journalist had acquired or built up a persona which matched the sinister picture at the top of his column: a man of power and mystery, laconic, steely. The possession of young mistresses contributed to it, and it was also obligatory that his public attitude towards them should be masterful and remote.

It was Bassett whom Bertie wanted, not the girl; but it was the girl's idiom with which he was familiar.

Whether from a genuine interest in such a brawny and personable young man or merely to console herself for her protector's neglect it was hard to say, but the girl soon took upon herself the frequent glances which Bertie directed at the party she was in but not of.

Quite quickly there came a general coalescence of the groups at that end of the bar. It was natural that the girl and Bertie—his second companion had by now also departed—should find themselves next to each other, and, that having happened, should begin to talk together. Natural, too, that when the famous man—the persona, the picture blurring, as it were, under the frequent applications of gin—deigned to bring the girl into the con-

versation, Bertie, her adventurous admirer, was in it as well.

'Same again, Clin?'

'Of course, the F.O. know more about hushing up a stink than anyone—they ought to, they have enough practice. I told this smoothie he could have it one way or the other—don't drown it—either I'd print the whole dirt just as I'd got it, boots and spurs and riding switches, the lot, or . . . Hell, you'd better put another gin in it now. Or I wanted to know the real name of the wog prince with the dumb-bells.'

'Did he play ball, Clin?'

'What do you think? You've got to let your allies go to the wall sometimes. Perfidious Angletterre, as they say. Mind you, there were three resignations. I didn't give their names. You've got to keep a bargain, and I'm bound to say I don't like to crucify a man when I've already kicked him into the gutter. What's that?'

'Well, not if I'm on to some better dirt already. That was at the time when . . .'

'Come on, Clin, drink up.'

'Don't drown it. The time when we were running the Chief Constable's yacht story. Don't bloody drown it.'

'Come on, sweetie. We're moving on. Get a taxi, someone. George, get a taxi. No, we're not going-home-Clin, sweetie. Just restrain your quite understandable ardour. Taxi, George, taxi. Two, if we're all going.'

'You're coming, Ham. Mac. Johnny?'

'To Maud's, of course.'

'Well, sod you then, no offence, old boy. You're coming, laddie?'

'Yes, sure,' Bertie said.

'Don't drown it, there's a good lad.'

Left now with the famous man were only the girl,

Bertie and an acolyte who had been reduced to a glazed and smiling speechlessness.

Bassett himself was visibly under the influence of the drink he had consumed: the torrent of his self-glorification had dried up and he spoke only in brief sputtering phrases, yet he appeared to retain something of a grasp on events.

The girl, chain-smoking, had taken very little alcohol and was quite sober. Although Bertie had drunk a great deal more than he was accustomed to he still felt alert and eager, as if he had been sustained by his earlier sense of exhilaration, as if indeed, in some odd way, this were the event for which he had been preparing himself. Quite confident now, he knew himself to be on terms of complete equality with the famous man.

'She's a sweet girl, isn't she? Come on here to Clin, sweetie. Leave that handsome young . . .'

From time to time since they had been in the club Bassett had good-humouredly teased the girl about her supposed attraction to Bertie.

'Leave that handsome young . . . slob.'

He suddenly grasped her arm—sufficiently hard to make her wince—pulling her towards him.

He turned to Bertie. 'Buy me another drink. Don't buck your round.'

'I got the last one,' Bertie said mildly.

'Don't buck your round.' It was difficult to tell just how drunk he was: he slurred his words, but his eyes were sharply focused.

'If you want to drink with men, you've got to drink like a man.'

Bertie hesitated. 'I'll get you another if you like,' he said.

He ordered a single drink.

'Thank you, laddie. Don't drown it.'

Bassett began to drink in silence. He still had hold of the girl's arm.

'They're all the same, these young slobs, aren't they, Mac?

'Mac—oh, for God's sake!' The acolyte was still smiling vacuously, like one in a cataleptic trance. 'Tagging on and then they don't even . . .'

He addressed Bertie in sorrowful, avuncular tones: 'You shouldn't do it, lad. Let me give you a piece of advice: never buck your round.'

'Listen,' said Bertie. 'I don't mind, but I bought the last one.'

Bassett ignored him. He pulled the girl close to him.

'See, sweetie, he might be a handsome young slob. And I don't blame you. He's got nice fair curly hair and a skin like a baby's bottom, while I'm just a battered old . . . But what's he got, what's he do?

'What have you got? What do you do, baby-face?'

Bertie had flushed. He was not intimidated, only vastly confused by the abrupt change of tone.

'A bloody telephonist. That's a little girl's job.'

He could not hit the man: Bassett was too old; he was too drunk. Bertie himself was too disappointed.

Bassett whispered an obscenity to the girl, who smiled dutifully. With her smile—they were all aligned against him—Bertie was suddenly overwhelmed by his old self-distrust.

'Looking like a pretty film star, but only a poor bloody telephonist. "Sorry you've been troubled." ' He raised his voice to a falsetto squeak. 'That's all you do, isn't it, laddie?'

Bertie had to assert himself; it was absolutely necessary. He told them what else he did, blurting it out crudely, like a child trying to shock.

When he came downstairs the next morning his landlady greeted him with that air of arch and lubricious complicity which she always adopted on such mornings. She made no comment at first, however, being daunted possibly by his evident ill temper.

She could not restrain herself for long. 'Why did she go so early? Did she think your landlady, the old faggot, wouldn't approve?'

Apart from anything else, Bertie had a severe headache. He merely grunted.

'It wasn't Jean, was it? It wasn't that nice Jean? I would

have given her breakfast anyway, whoever she was, didn't you tell her?'

Bertie got up and left the room. He regretted treating the old woman with such rudeness, but he could not help himself.

The girl's last words—no, they were not, in fact, her last words, but they were the last he could remember—were reverberating in his head:

*'What do you think?'*

She had smiled at him in a manner that was provokingly derisive, and somehow the more so for not being entirely unsympathetic.

Back in his own room, he struck his fist hard several times against the table-top. Then he threw himself down on his unmade and considerably crumpled bed—like a child in a tantrum. That was what he was, a child, an innocent!

*'What do you think?'*

It was incredible that he had allowed himself so to have been deceived, or to have acquiesced in his own deception—and he had not even been interested in the girl . . . especially. He must have been more affected by drink than he had realized. But that was no excuse. No excuse for his acceptance of Bassett's half-apology; his humiliating toleration of the journalist's sudden resumption of amiability; and, above all, no excuse for his own unguarded boasting.

He could not remember everything he had said, but he could remember enough, so that now, stretched on the bed, he again clenched his fists and banged them into the pillow.

Remembered how he had found himself in a taxi with the girl—he did not even know her name—and the famous man suddenly no longer there.

Some time later he had learned her name.

And that morning very early—he had not heard her get up, and when he awoke she was almost dressed, pulling on her stockings—the worst of it had come to him suddenly and certainly, like a memory of a calamity forgotten for a few hours in sleep:

'Did Bassett tell you to come with me?'

She had lifted her head, still holding the stocking stretched over her white and fleshless thigh.

'What do you think?'

And even then, as now, it was not the fact of his ignominious deception which consumed him, but the guilty awareness of his own breach of trust.

## Chapter 8

EXCEPT for Julius, they all heard the news about Webber by telephone.

Having made the decision to give up her activities at the studio, Louise had not, as she might have hoped, regained her former peace of mind.

She had come to terms with her husband, and superficially everything between them was as it had been before; yet now, aspects of their relationship which previously had been accepted by them both unquestioningly were subject to doubt and interrogation. She still studied her horoscopes. At night, sleeping badly, she found it impossible to prevent herself from continually propounding the arithmetical problems of their debts.

Very aware of her psychical deterioration, she told herself that she would recover once she had informed the bookseller of her resolution. But that was an action which—superstition, perhaps, extending its sphere—she would not expedite.

‘When he telephones, I’ll tell him. I’ll just tell him I’ve finished. I don’t have to give him any explanation.’

Yet she had rehearsed innumerable explanations—each as unsatisfactory to herself as she thought they would sound to Sammy.

And this was the morning. Summer had arrived: the sunshine streamed into the house, with the net curtains gusting at the open windows. The dance music on the radio provided an accompaniment to the whirr of the vacuum-cleaner and the ululations of the water-pipes.

Some time before the bookseller’s call was due she felt a tension in the stomach, a slight sickness. But her resolution was firm . . . and did not weaken even when the telephone failed to ring at the expected time.

The call came about half an hour later than usual.

‘Good morning, Louise.’



Now that the time had come to tell him she no longer felt nervous—only annoyed with herself for having put it off until this moment, so that the bookseller's arrangements would be upset.

'I'm sorry, Louise, there will be no session today.'

Her reaction was slow.

'Mr Samson, I'm sorry, but I must tell you . . . Why, what's the matter?'

It had happened: she was too late. The police car was already driving up to her door . . . and at her husband's school . . .

'I have bad news, I am afraid,' said the bookseller. 'Webber is dead. He died in hospital last night.'

'An accident?' Veronica said.

She could hear only with difficulty. On the landing where the communal telephone stood, the housekeeper was having a noisy argument at the door of one of the rooms.

'No. He was a sick man. We did not know how ill he was. He was taken into hospital four days ago. One asks oneself, if we had known earlier . . .'

'I'm sorry,' Veronica said. Then, because she thought this had sounded too perfunctory: 'Really, I'm terribly sorry.'

It was the image of the hospital which horrified her, bled her heart. To die in that indifferent, aseptic whiteness! Anyone—for her mind carried only an imprecise, cloudy picture of the photographer as a living person!

'Was he alone?'

That would be—it had been her daily dread—the worst fate.

'I was with him finally. He had been drugged, so that at the end anyway he was in no pain.'

The tenant to whom the housekeeper had been speaking suddenly slammed the door, making Veronica start.

'Of course, we shall not be able to do any work until I have made some other arrangements,' the bookseller was saying. 'But if you are short of money I could . . .'

'No,' said Veronica. 'No, thank you.' It would have been unseemly.

'Well, if you should be. I wondered whether . . .' There was suddenly an uncharacteristic diffidence in the voice at the other end of the line. 'He had been married. In fact, he was not divorced, but he had lost all contact with his family. I did try to find them but I was unsuccessful. He was not the sort of man to make close friends.'

'Yes?' said Veronica.

'I wonder whether you would come to the funeral?'

All the deaths she had known—living, as she had, for years in the ambience of death! Why now, when this man had meant so little to her, should she feel so personally involved, as if, like blood relatives—however distant they have grown—she shared with him a common heritage?

'Yes,' she said, 'I will come.'

When Bertie replaced the receiver he was not thinking of Webber. The reactions of them all had that in common: through the twisted meshes of their own preoccupations the grey ghost of the photographer slipped weightless as a shadow.

Bertie's feelings were conflicting: there was a certain degree of relief in the knowledge that the next session was postponed; on the other hand, he needed the bookseller to restore his shattered confidence. He had instantly agreed to attend the funeral.

The girl's departure in the still light of dawn had not been the last he had heard of her. She had telephoned him the next day.

'Where did you get this number?' It was his immediate thought. 'My name's not in the book.'

She laughed. 'I have my methods.'

'I didn't tell you.'

'But I can read, darling. Don't you know, they put the numbers on the telephones on that little space in the dial—in black figures? And just by your front door, as you weren't a gentleman to come and see me out . . .'

'Go to hell,' he said, and slammed the receiver down.

It was completely in character that he should—especially when he suspected mockery—act precipitately, and as

instantly regret it. Since he had let the girl depart from his room unquestioned—but for that one crucial question—he had been wishing ardently that he knew where to get in touch with her, to find out more about Bassett and Bassett's intentions. Now he had thrown away another opportunity.

The next day he had reached the stage of telephoning Bassett's newspaper, but when the telephone operator had asked for his name he had hung up.

It was not only his fair hair and fresh complexion which made Bertie appear younger than he was in fact: his face had retained that mildly surprised expression, easily changing to petulance, which one sees in children. Many of his responses to experience were child-like also. Having expected to be engaged for some hours at the studio, he now found himself with the best part of the day on his hands. As a result he felt frustrated and at a loss, like a boy deprived of an expected treat; and the solution which he found was also childish—childish but somewhat endearing—: he sought compensation, typically, in the mindless sphere of vigorous action. His landlady had an attic room, stacked with old furniture and boxes, which had for years remained un-entered. From time to time she spoke of her intention of having it cleared out and cleaned. Bertie offered—without any thought of reward—to do the job for her, and for the rest of that day, naked but for a pair of shorts and gym-shoes, he heaved and hauled, swept and scoured and whitewashed.

At one moment, while he was standing on a step-ladder, his torso dust-streaked, the blond hairs thick on his body glistening and matted with sweat, the muscles in his arms heavily aching, for he had been brushing the ceiling, he was suddenly struck by a memory of Webber, grey and coughing.

He spoke his name aloud. 'The poor . . .'

The dead man's name floated on the dry, dusty air, floated over the piled boxes and the heap of discarded rubbish.

Bertie himself coughed, the dust in his throat.

Julius had, of course, been the first to learn. Since the

photographer's entry into hospital, Sammy had been a constant visitor and had on other occasions absented himself from the shop for lengthy periods on what Julius understood to be missions concerned with Webber's affairs.

That morning Julius had had to open up the shop himself. Sammy had come in quite shortly afterwards. Calm, spruce as ever—he had evidently had a shave between the hospital and the shop—he showed no signs of having been sitting up most of the night with a dying man.

In response to Julius's look of enquiry, the bookseller said simply: 'Yes, he's dead.' He then passed straight through to the rooms behind the shop.

Julius accepted this information, even welcomed it, for the absences of the bookseller had caused minor complications to his own existence. Perhaps the nearest he came to a positive reaction was to permit himself a small awareness of self-congratulation on the unforced equanimity with which he received the news. He carried on with his duties about the shop, dismissing Webber from his mind.

After a while Sammy came through the curtains and sat at the table. From time to time they exchanged a few words concerned with business, the bookseller, quite himself, speaking in the especially precise and detached tones which he reserved for business matters. Julius dealt with the few customers who required attention.

A traveller called, and Sammy took him into the office, returning to his seat at the table when the man left. Shortly afterwards he pushed aside a pile of books.

'It will be up to me to make arrangements for Webber's funeral.' He said it as if he were speaking to himself as much as to Julius.

'Have you let the others know?'

'Let them know what?'

'Well, there'll be no more sessions for the time being.' Julius was leaning back negligently against the shelves.

'Yes, of course,' said the bookseller, a touch of asperity in his voice.

Julius said nothing; he could think of nothing to say.

Suddenly, to his intense surprise, he heard his own voice: 'Couldn't you have saved him?'

He saw Sammy for once shaken from his customary poise. The bookseller looked up at Julius almost as if startled, the lines of his face tightened.

'Who? Webber? What are you saying, Julius?'

'I just thought . . .'

'You know quite well what he died of.'

'I'd forgotten,' Julius said ineptly.

Sammy was still looking hard at him, no longer angrily, but as if he would read the mind beneath the skull.

'What made you say that, Julius?'

'I'd forgotten,' Julius said again, as meaninglessly as a small child reproved, and shifting his legs uneasily. He knew that what he had said had been quite absurd.

'You must have had some reason for saying it.' Now the bookseller's expression was more reflective.

'I don't know,' said Julius. Some remote thought was struggling for expression. 'I knew he had cancer all right, but . . .'

'Cancer of the lung.'

'... but just for a minute—I don't know why—it seemed as if I thought he had killed himself.'

Now that he had said it, it seemed nonsense, gibberish.

'And that I could have saved him?' The bookseller's tone was quite serious.

Julius did not reply. To tell the truth, he was no longer very interested.

'Perhaps in a sense he killed himself—in the sense that a man dies when he becomes ready for death.' Sammy's voice now was grave and distant. 'Do you think there was anything more then that I could have done? I mean if Webber were in fact ready for death. Or that to have done it would not have been a cruelty? To prolong an existence of which he had grown weary!

'Webber was not one for saving.' This he said with an air of finality. 'Now, Julius, what I have to do is concerned with the living. I mean the effect Webber's death will have on the others. Yes, even on you perhaps. There is some saving to be done there.'

Julius had only just perceptibly shrugged his shoulders.

'For they—we—were involved with him in a manner which will make his death seem something personal, although different, to each one of them—not a mere casual intrusion, but an event for which each must bear an individual responsibility.

'You don't understand me, do you?' The bookseller smiled at Julius with tenderness. 'I do not want it to finish here, you see. This would be a bad way to end our activities, for all of us. We must keep together now.'

He stood up. 'I shall want to talk to you about the arrangements for the funeral.'

## Chapter 9

**N**EVER leave me . . . never leave. I need you. I want you. I need you.'

A bell somewhere was ringing. It was a warm, sticky evening. Veronica held his damp hand to her mouth, kissing its palm. Promise me, she thought.

'Promise me, promise me,' she said.

A heavy fly bombarding the window held her staring eyes like a hypnotist's device. She felt him move his head where it was pressed in the angle between her neck and shoulder.

'Always. Never leave me.'

She was eaten up, gnawed to the bone by nameless apprehensions. Her very existence seemed to be compounded of inherent contradictions, a nightmare as inexplicable as black magic, values reversed, so that pain would announce itself by laughter, tenderness bring tears, and self-fulfilment lie in annihilation.

'Would you kill me if I asked you to, if I asked you to and you knew I really meant it?'

She felt his answering words form themselves, as tangible as type, against the creased skin of her neck, but did not hear them.

'With a gun would you shoot me? Or could you strangle me, just as I am, lying here? With your hands.'

It was not self-dramatization, not the lover's romantic dream of death in happiness. Modern urban people tend to speak of their 'nerves'—jangling, strung tight—as if they were the strings of a musical instrument, which could be put right by a little dexterous tuning; but Veronica was in the grip of a nervous disorder as fundamental as damnation, frenzied as mania.

Reality had at last impinged upon the dream, and—the basic anomaly, the ultimate perversity!—in the threat to the dream she felt the dissolution of all that was recognizable and actual.

In the passage from *Doctor Faustus* from which the title

to this book is derived, the Tempter (it is not explicitly stated whether he has actual existence or is merely a product of the dream of the composer-hero, Adrian Leverkühn) continues thus:

*What is sick, what well, my friend, about that we must not let the philistine have the last word. Whether he does understand life so well remains a question. What has come about by the way of death, of sickness, at that life has many a time clutched with joy and let itself be led by it higher and further. Have you forgotten what you learned in the schools, that God can bring good out of evil and that the occasion to it shall not be marred? Item, a man must have been always ill and mad in order that others no longer need be so. And where madness begins to be malady, there is nobody knows at all.*

The dividing line—if, in fact, it exists—is thin and imprecise. Veronica had for a long while been ill, in the simple medical sense of the word; she had also been a little mad. Now life, clutching with joy, sought to redress the balance: she was at the point where a combination of forces was compelling her to relinquish her madness.

In this, the love of the man she held in her arms on this humid, sweaty evening was a powerful agent, and the capacity to love which he released in her; yet, alongside, a complementary, although unrecognized, pressure stemmed from her knowledge of the death of Webber, the photographer.

To quote the Tempter once more:

*Morbid and healthy! Without the morbid would life all its whole life never have survived. Genuine and false! Are we land-losing knaves? Do we draw the good things out of the nose of nothing? Where nothing is, there the Devil too has lost his right and no pallid Venus produces anything worthwhile! We make naught new—that is other people's matter. We only release, only set free. We let the lameness and self-consciousness, the chaste scruples and doubts go to the Devil.*

In this context the Tempter's 'we' refers to the artist, the criminal and the madman. For 'the Devil', read, if you like, 'Mr Samson'. Over and above the mutual love of Veronica and Bateman and the catalytic effect of Webber's death, the primary force obliterating Veronica's



lameness and self-consciousness derived from her relationship with the bookseller. Her scruples could not be called chaste, in the ordinary meaning of the word, yet her part in the activities of the studio violated a fundamental tabu, and, thus, released, set free. Is it any wonder that—returning to the imagery of the present day—her nerves were jangling, strung tight?

At a time when passion should have been spent, she moaned and trembled in her lover's arms.

When they got up from the bed it was dusk, but they left the light off. The near-darkness, a shabby darkness, invested the commonplace room with a kind of mystery, the ominous ingredient of poetry. The edges of things were taken off.

The room could not have been more prosaic, more cheaply and impersonally furnished—angular, arid, the essence of the masculine principle, like a barracks-room. No other woman had entered it since Bateman had become the occupier. Now he felt aware of the difference, felt, as it were, the feminine charge, which—as the light softened outlines—softened the spaces in between.

The darkness of the room seemed to reach out to meet, to blend with the gathering darkness outside. She was sitting by the window; still now and quiet, she answered him briefly when he spoke but remotely, as if she were not really in the room but herself outside, where the darkness of the sky and the roofs opposite met in a gradation of darkness. Yet her nervousness, her exhaustion was like a physical presence in the room, adding perhaps to the 'poetic' effect—the effect present in much modern poetry, in which a kind of integral neurasthenia charges commonplace, homely images with a potent electricity.

People were talking in the flat above, but no words were distinguishable because of the constant humming of the city's traffic.

'I think there's going to be a thunderstorm. It's so sticky.'

Why should Veronica accept his inarticulate, unskilful

love? What had he to offer which could adequately fill a place in the rich and varied tapestry of her existence?

Bateman was asking himself these questions, and yet, on another level, he knew their essential irrelevance, knew that he was deceiving himself. The image of her which he bore in his conscious mind was like a painting on top of another painting, and as one looked at the canvas, lived with it, so one slowly became aware of the original beneath.

For a few minutes he left the room, busying himself in the kitchen. When he came back she was still sitting in the same position at the window.

‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m frightened, darling. I don’t know why. I’m frightened. What’s going to become of us?’

It was a glimpse of the original—even to the hackneyed terms of expression. He felt a great tenderness for her. He went over and stood behind her, putting his hands lightly on her shoulders. She did not move.

She was still outside in the darkness—a part of it.

‘You’re not married, are you? Really, truly, tell me.’ She had not turned her head. ‘You’d tell me if you were, wouldn’t you? You haven’t been fooling me?’

He knew with certainty then, with a telepathic insight, that outside in the darkness, beyond the glass of the window, she had been seeing herself as married. It was a new thought, a new dream, a new identity. Herself the mistress of the household, the children in bed, pouring wine in long deep-ruby Venetian glasses for the solid and elegant guests on the balcony above the park in the gathering dusk. This, he could see with her eyes.

‘No, I am not married now,’ he said. ‘I’ve told you the truth always.’

He thought; and added quickly: ‘About everything important, anyway. Important to us.’

She did not seem to notice this reservation, but to banish it he began to talk volubly, more freely perhaps than ever before, encouraged by the darkness and the nervous poetry of the room. He spoke of his feelings for her, the unrehearsed—even unimagined—words passing his lips with the fluency of an often-repeated speech.

'So it all goes back,' he concluded, 'to that first time I saw you—I don't think you even noticed me then, did you?—sweeping into the shop, that's the only word for it, and you stood beside me, and, however stupid it may sound, I knew then that . . .'

She was not crying but had begun to shake, under his hands on her shoulders.

'Darling, what's the matter? Tell me, I want to help you. I . . .'

'Nothing,' she said, 'nothing. I'm all right.'

She was still trembling. She moved away from him and stood up.

'Why are we sitting here in the dark? Let's put the light on.'

She put the light on. The room resumed its prosaic proportions. She faced him, smiling.

'Perhaps I'm upset,' she said. 'Did I tell you? I'm going to a funeral tomorrow.'

## Chapter 10

WEBBER was to be cremated. Now the hearse, with the two accompanying cars, had drawn up outside the bookshop, where the pornographers had assembled.

Julius hung a sign within the door, announcing that the shop was temporarily closed. With the bookseller for the moment engaged with the undertakers, the others, unsupervised, stood in a confused group on the pavement.

The hearse and the long limousines partially blocked the road, so that other vehicles had difficulty in passing and something of a traffic jam built up. The drivers, respectfully patient at first, grew restless, and those at the rear, unable to see the sombre cause of their delay, began to sound their horns. A policeman appeared. A taxi, frantically reversing, nearly struck Bertie.

It was then that to Julius the whole occasion began to take on the aspect of a jaunt, like a firm's or a club's outing to the seaside, a break from the usual routine the more provocatively exotic because one's companions were people whom one associated with quite different activities. There was no telling what oddities of behaviour they might indulge in under these unfamiliar and piquant circumstances.

Bertie banged his fist against the side of the taxi which had nearly knocked him down and said to the driver, in a voice both more refined and more authoritative than his usual accents: 'You might show a little respect, driver.'

Eventually, Julius, Bertie, Veronica and Louise got into one car, leaving Sammy to travel alone in the other. The cortège moved under way.

Veronica knew she ought to be thinking about Webber, but it was hard to concentrate. In the first place, there was the unaccustomed luxuriance of this drive through the streets of the city; and, then, it was interesting to observe the reactions of people outside who saw the coffin go by. They stopped once at traffic lights: a man, with a woman, waiting to cross the road, not more than four feet away from the car, was laughing; looking up, he saw

Veronica's eyes on him; first he looked away, then he drew his face into lines of gravity; he blushed; he scowled; then it was as if his eyes were drawn back irresistibly to Veronica, who had—unconsciously almost—assumed a mournful countenance. As the car drew away, the stranger made a desperate attempt to express a wholly unfelt sympathy. Veronica only just resisted the childish temptation to pull a face at him.

No one said very much to start with. Decorum seemed to demand a clipped reticence, an avoidance of the object of their journey.

Bertie complained of a headache, and Louise took a tube of aspirins from her handbag, offering them to him without speaking.

'Thanks. I had a thick night last night.'

No one made any comment, and Bertie, uneasy with the silence, took the bull by the horns.

'It's funny—only us here, I mean. He told me once he'd been married and had got four kids. His wife left him.'

It was the first time anyone had spoken of Webber since the journey—his last journey—had started.

'Who are you talking about?'

'Why, Webber!' said Bertie, realizing too late that Julius's interpellation had been . . . well, God knows what he thought it was, funny or something.

But Bertie had broken the spell: they all had something to say about Webber.

'He wasn't the sort of man you could ever get to know, was he? I mean he was sort of on the outside all the time. But then perhaps he knew he was ill. Do you think he knew?' That was Veronica. 'It's terrible to be ill, really ill,' she added.

'I always felt sorry for him somehow,' said Louise. 'You couldn't ever imagine him enjoying anything, could you?'

'How do you know?' said Bertie, slightly aggressively. 'How can you say? I'll admit he was a quiet sort of chap, but—not to speak ill of—you never know. Still water and all that. I wonder why his wife left him.'

'Because he used to drink too much,' Julius said. 'And then when she'd gone he gave it up completely.'

No one knew whether to believe him. They seemed suddenly all to be talking at once—that is, all except Julius. He was being confirmed in his expectation of the incongruous, the bathetic.

‘It’s all right for us, we’re young, but Webber—not to speak ill of—it wasn’t much of a job, was it, taking dirty pictures?’

‘It’s funny, of course I don’t really believe these things, but in the horoscope, just that day, it said . . .’

All talking together! But, as happens, all but one of the voices ceased at the same instant, leaving that one which had been raised in competition, clamorous and strident in its singularity, as if proclaiming an urgent, transcendental truth.

‘. . . his cuffs always frayed and his collar, but his shoes were always beautifully polished.’

Hearing her own voice ring out, Veronica put her hand to her mouth and cut off whatever else she had been about to say. So, perhaps, in a sense, that was Webber’s epitaph—‘*his shoes were always beautifully polished*’—for they stopped talking about him then.

They were well on their way to the crematorium, driving now through the unfamiliar environs of the suburbs. The little splutter of animation had been extinguished, and they were, Julius thought, like the coach passengers on the trip having settled down after the initial excitement, taking in the unaccustomed impressions and looking forward to the greater novelty ahead.

Yet the grey ghost of Webber was not entirely absent. Louise, for instance, while her eyes followed the distractions along their way, found herself laden with a strange thought: it seemed to her that their joint composure (which had impressed Julius in a different way) was a kind of crime, or made them accomplices to a crime, as if by having become reconciled to Webber’s death, having come to terms with it, they had become the guilty cause of it. Irrational as this was, it took all the pleasure from the journey, so that she wanted it over and done with as quickly as possible.

The crematorium was built on the side of a hill, the road circling the hill. On this last stage, the cars had perceptibly speeded up.

Another strange thought manifested itself, this time in the normally unfanciful mind of Bertie: they were driving faster because they had fallen behind schedule; they were late for Webber's appointment; unless they got there in time they would miss their turn—he would miss his turn—and they would have to wait indefinitely for Webber to take his place in Eternity. Bertie found himself willing the cortège forward.

Finally, they came to the crematorium from above, the road descending between, on one side, brightly painted bungalows and small villas and, on the other, a formal public park. Above the trees hung a thin wisp of smoke, its source invisible.

The gates were open; a man in a nondescript uniform—not quite like a park-keeper's, not quite like a gaoler's—standing on the raked gravel, waved them in.

Veronica had not known what she had expected, but it was certainly not this: the crematorium, red-bricked, bright, with only the beginnings of a creeper spreading its tentacles a few feet from the ground, sharp-edged, with narrow slits of windows, resembling more than anything one of those new public-houses built by roundabouts on the trunk roads; and yet, no, really quite different, she saw as her eyes travelled upwards, because of the formidable chimney (from which no smoke now arose) topping it all in bizarre disproportion.

She had an obscure memory of a funeral somewhere, some time in the past, herself standing on the outskirts among the tombstones, the raw hole in the ground, the lowered coffin, the clods of earth drumming on its lid, rain, a woman weeping—and felt a grievous sense of disappointment.

Another party of mourners had just emerged and were standing around somewhat lost, with that dazed look people wear when they come out of a cinema and outside it is still light. Veronica felt ashamed because their own party was so small: Webber was so meagrely honoured.

Sammy was talking to another uniformed attendant. No one knew quite what to do. They conversed in whispers and unnatural smiles.

'Well, let's go in, shall we?' Bertie said, taking on the masculine organizational role.

Now the pornographers were assembled within the crematorium, Julius felt his curiosity quickened, an almost sensual bourgeoning of his interest, not only in his companions, but also in their surroundings and the scene enacted before them.

This, then, was what life came to, what death meant—and they spoke of a mystery! His mouth curled in contempt. Anything less mysterious was inconceivable.

With its tastefully arranged flowers, its rich, plush curtains hanging in unnatural folds, the freshly polished woodwork, the crematorium created the impression of a spruce cheerfulness; but that, taken in conjunction with its purpose, in conjunction with the black box and the body within it awaiting its final consummation, engendered an irony so absolute as to reduce both life and death to a bleak, null void. Death—Julius did not put it into words, but knew it then in his heart—had meaning only if it were dressed in the trappings of blood and violence.

The priest had begun his address. He was a youngish man, with one of those handsome, self-regarding faces which seem, according to the play of light or a minute change of expression, to reflect alternately tortured asceticism or sensual indulgence. His movements were brisk and athletic; he had a fine voice.

Bertie found it impossible to follow the priest's words: concentrating hard, he would capture a phrase and allow his mind to play over it, but during that time the succeeding sentences flowed past like a stream rushing unchecked to its inevitable destination.

He found himself looking forward to the time when they would be outside again, in the trim, laundered garden. All his life it had been like that: he had anticipated, looked forward to the end of things; even the good things



—the smoky card party, the boxing match, the complaisant girl in his bed—all had bored before coming to their natural end, leaving him inhabiting a vacuum.

The priest's gestures, controlled, serene, had the meaninglessness, the lack of necessity of the movements of a dance band conductor.

Veronica and Louise were seated side by side and followed each other in their responses.

To her own surprise, Veronica found herself interested and affected by all that was happening. She was observant, too, of her fellow-mourners. Sammy was directly in front of her, so that she could not see his face, but she drew comfort from the controlled assurance of his movements, a certain calm and solidity about him which acted as a counter-balance to the light unreality of the too empty chapel. She was aware of the point at which Bertie's attention had turned to fretfulness, seeing him scratch and wriggle and deeply inhale. Two or three times her eyes met the sardonic gaze of Julius and she always looked quickly away, either to the service-paper, brilliant in her black-gloved hand, or upwards to where the priest made the movements which, to Veronica, seemed sincere and dignified, and the autonomous voice weaved its hypnotic spell.

Undoubtedly, it was because she was so close to Louise—she could not turn her head to look at her—that she was so slow in becoming aware that something extraordinary was happening, for when finally she was alerted she realized that it had been happening already for some little time.

The service was nearing its climax. The priest's tones had become more emotional; his cassock swung with his movements. Even Julius—this was what Veronica was thinking then—had been brought back to the essentials of the occasion, his eyes fixed on the mounted coffin.

And it was then that Veronica realized that the woman beside her was, had been, trembling uncontrollably, like an animal in a fever.

Veronica glanced obliquely downwards. Louise held both hands clasped tightly together, the service-paper

crumpled between them. Even then, Veronica received the impression that she was not so much trying to still her vibrating nerves as to hold herself back, suppress some threatening enormity.

She looked at her face: it was white and glistening, but that was not what struck: Louise's normally placid, rather heavy expression was unrecognizable: it was as if all the emotion of which she was capable had been suddenly mobilized there, sharpening and illuminating her features with an exultant determination, like a martyr's or a murderer's.

Had the priest received some intuition? It seemed that at this point of the ceremony he was hastening, like an outdoor speaker trying to reach the nub of his argument before the advent of the storm which would drive away his audience and render derisory all that had gone before.

The black coffin, apparently of its own accord, slid forward, eerily—as if a motor-car without a driver had begun to move off along a flat road. As silently and impersonally the bronze gates began to open to admit it.

Louise's head was lifted back. Veronica saw the tightening of the muscles in her neck, like cords, as she gathered her breath to shout, and knew, if not the actual words that had formed themselves, their sense, their impact, their enormity.

'No,' she said, her voice a loud whisper. 'No, Louise.'

Simultaneously, she turned and clasped her, bearing her down, and with the strength of her grip instinctively inflicting a pain which would drive out the other, less tangible hurt.

The breath in Louise's throat expelled itself in a shrill, wordless sob. Webber's coffin had passed from sight, the brass gates closing on it as impersonally as they had opened to receive it.

The body consumed, the thin wisp of smoke rising above the trees to greet the next cortège.

Louise, supported by Veronica's grip on her arm, scraped her shoe over the gravel.

'I'm all right now,' she said. 'Thank you.'

The bird-song, the ordinary outdoor noises seemed especially shrill in her head.

'I know what it was you were going to say.'

'Yes,' said Louise dully.

'It isn't true,' said Veronica. 'It can't be true, how can it?'

'No.'

It did not matter any more. Why did she have to persist?

'I was right, wasn't I? You were going to say, we . . .'

Bertie, standing with Julius some ten yards away, flicked the match with which he had lit his cigarette and it fell, hissing, on to the gravel just in front of the two young women.

'... but that's absurd, isn't it, Louise? You must realize.'

'I know. Yes,' Louise said.

How, now, to explain the blinding revelation she had experienced then: that they—they, the pornographers; they, humanity—were all indivisible and mutually responsible unto death? For now it no longer seemed true even to herself.

'It was ridiculous. I must have been . . . hysterical.'

In the car, returning, Julius felt a sense of deprivation. Nothing outrageous had occurred, nothing that could satisfy his appetite for the banal or bizarre. His disappointment was the keener because he felt that he had failed fully to comprehend the incident which had taken place at the end of the service; a complete realization of what had happened then might, he thought, have been uniquely rewarding.

Only one reference to this incident was made on their return journey. Bertie, leaning forward, had laid his hand on Veronica's knee.

'It got you too, did it, dear? I felt the same. I wanted to stop it too—when the coffin began to move, like a bloody conveyor belt.'

Julius was watching Veronica closely. She flicked her eyes at Louise and then looked downwards, her lashes curled against the skin of her cheek. The beginnings, the sketch of a sly smile moved around her mouth.

'Yes,' she said. 'I couldn't help crying out. Like a conveyor belt, you're quite right.'

Julius looked at Louise. She was staring out of the window as if she had not heard. He felt more certain than ever that he had failed to understand.

It was the flavour of complicity, as subtle, as tempting as a criminal desire, which had sketched the smile around Veronica's mouth; and the shadow of it remained throughout the journey.

She had learned the taste for it from her present companions—this revelation of a freedom which she had never dared to imagine; for involved in such complicity one wears a mask which obscures one's identity, one's age and class and sex, and which confers upon the wearer release from the slavery of personality and licence to act in perfect innocence, fulfilling the deepest secret desires of the psyche. And this was a complicity within complicity, a mask beneath the mask, sharing this secret with Louise, guarding it even from those who, masked themselves, had admitted her to their secret, outrageous, anonymous freedom.

She had never before felt so strong a sense of her own identity. As the sleek, coffin-black motor-car bore them together through the mundane streets of the city, she knew with a certainty beyond reason that here finally she had found the self for which she had always been looking: a conspirator among conspirators.

It could not survive immaculate for long: the habits of fear and doubt and self-distrust which Veronica had carried with her all her life soon began to shadow the pure image of freedom born on the journey from the crematorium.

The bookseller, carrying conventional observance to its conclusion, had brought them all back to the studio,

where he produced sandwiches and drinks. They stood and sat, ate and drank, according to their dispositions, the conversation impersonal and general, as fragmented as the chatter at a cocktail-party, as if they were united by only the frail links of proximity and acquaintanceship.

Veronica tried hard to discern beneath these separate clad posturings—the hands holding plates and glasses, the faces reflecting the trivality of their words—the *complicity* of the conjoined and naked embraces which the studio had engendered. The purity and freedom of those embraces, recalled coldly under the present circumstances, seemed like a chimera, or an atavistic memory of an impossible state of grace. And beneath the smiles, the polite and amiable conversation, in each of them there seemed to exist private—not griefs, no: Webber had passed, passed for ever—private and separate worries and despairs.

Louise was avoiding her. Seeing her now—she was sitting on the arm of a chair, a tilted plate in her hand, her head turned upwards towards Bertie—how was it possible to believe in the reality of that terrible cry which had formed itself on her lips?

*'We killed him.'*

Perhaps, Veronica thought wildly for an instant, she had imagined it; Louise had not been going to shout out anything; even, it had been that she, Veronica herself, had been the one who had formulated that cry, transferring it, like an unworthy emotion, to her innocent neighbour.

*'We killed him.'* She repeated the words soundlessly; they held no meaning.

Bertie was coming towards her, holding out a plate. She took a biscuit from it automatically. He made some jocular remark, which she did not hear. Although he had drunk only a little he gave the impression of a kind of blundering intoxication, a caricature of his normal noisy party self.

Julius—to whom Bertie next offered the plate—wore an air of abstraction, different in kind from his usual remoteness, suggesting an inner disturbance. Veronica's eyes sought the bookseller. He was pouring something into a

glass. He looked as he always looked; yet even he—or so it seemed to Veronica—had the attitude of a man existing on two levels at once: beneath his hospitable composure, she sensed a watchfulness, a calculation.

‘You’re drinking sherry?’

‘Will you have another sandwich?’

The polite exchanges seemed monstrous to Veronica. It had all broken up, the sense of complicity, the fraternity in which she had found her true self. A pillar of her existence had crumbled; this was the end, not a wake for Webber, but for . . .

‘What are we going to do now?’

She had taken a pace forward. She had not shouted it, but her voice was shrill, cutting off the other conversations, as when she had pronounced Webber’s epitaph. They were all looking at her.

‘I mean’—she was addressing the bookseller, standing half-turned where he had been pouring another drink, watching her attentively, the bottle in his hand—‘I mean now that Webber’s . . . We’ve finished, have we? That’s what you’ve brought us here to tell us.’

He raised the bottle to the level, but without taking his eyes from her.

‘Because there’s no one to take the pictures now.’

## Chapter 11

'THANK you, sir,' said the waitress.

She must have been new, for Julius who ate here regularly had not seen her before.

'For God's sake, don't call me sir,' he said, walking out.

In his self-indulgent moments, nothing pleased him more than to leave a trail of ambiguity behind him: she could not have told whether he had spoken from contempt or equalitarian principles.

It was almost dark outside: cars had their sidelights on and most of the shop-windows were lit. A cigarette in a man's mouth suddenly glowed red as he drew on it. And yet it was still only early evening: a thick, black blanket of cloud had settled overhead, filling the streets, although the actual air was clear, with an unseasonable fog-light, saturnine and ominous.

Julius felt a little uneasy as he made his way back to the bookshop. He knew that when Sammy had dismissed him, in order to speak alone with that crazy girl, he had intended him to return in a little while.

He had gone back to his room, where he had found Princeton playing cards with two of his compatriots; Julius had joined them and time had slipped by. Then he had felt hungry; although more or less indifferent as to what he ate, Julius had a hearty appetite. There was an element of defiance, however, of gratuitous opposition—which, significantly, he did not attempt to analyse—in his determination to have a meal before going back. His uneasiness now was less on account of his lateness as such than from a conviction that Sammy would, with one perceptive glance, discern his motives.

Two streetwalkers, strawberry-mouthed, stood on the corner. Julius responded to their comradely greeting with a nod of his head.

It's time I was moving on, he thought. He meant, it was time he finished with the bookshop and with Sammy. But

he knew too that he would have to wait for something to happen, for some incident to apply the spur.

The shop was locked. As Julius fumbled for his key, a man appeared abruptly at his elbow.

'Not open today?'

Julius turned slowly to look at him. Not a regular . . . and not a policeman.

'It doesn't look like it, does it?' Julius put the key in the lock.

The stranger laid his hand on Julius's arm. He was a young man, with immature features, wearing—perhaps in an attempt to achieve authority—an enormously heavy pair of spectacles.

'I suppose you couldn't . . . a friend recommended me.'

'There's a bookshop round the corner,' Julius said, naming it. 'They'll be open. Recommended you for what?'

'Oh, you know, old boy.'

'I'm sorry. We're closed,' Julius said with finality.

It suddenly occurred to him to wonder how this youth could have appeared at his elbow so suddenly. He glanced round. A car was parked at the kerb a few yards away; its nearside window was down, and a man sitting within it was watching them.

'Recommended you for what?' Julius said again.

The youth laughed with a nervous falsity. 'Something special, I was told.'

'Who was your friend?' Julius said in a more amiable way.

'Oh, what's in a name, old boy?' the youth said.

Julius had unlocked the door. The youth hovered.

Julius grinned, baring his teeth. 'What's in a name?' he repeated blandly. He stepped inside. 'I've got one for you.'

He uttered it, then slammed the door.

The shop was in darkness. Looking through the window, Julius saw the young man go to the parked car and speak to its occupant. He turned and looked back at the shop, seeming undecided. He spoke again to the man within the car and then went round and got into the driving seat.



He started the engine but the car, instead of pulling straight away, edged slowly forward along the kerb. Then it seemed to stop again, directly opposite the shop. The man beside the driver appeared to be holding something up to the open window. There was a white flash.

A line of light slid over the floor of the shop. Julius turned, hearing the car drive off.

'Julius? What are you doing?'

Sammy stood framed before the parted curtains.

'There's some funny business,' Julius said. 'Some comedian stopped me as I was . . .'

The bookseller interrupted him. 'I want to talk to you. You've been a long time.'

He disappeared behind the curtains, and Julius followed him.

'You've been a long time,' Sammy said again. 'What do you mean, funny business?'

'I'm sorry,' Julius said grudgingly.

He began to describe his encounter on the doorstep, but while he was still speaking he observed that the bookseller was paying only a casual attention, so he abbreviated the story.

'I was watching to see them drive off, and . . .'

Again, Sammy interrupted him. 'They've gone anyway?'

'Just as you came out.'

'And you say you are sure he was not a policeman?'

'Not in any language,' Julius said.

'Then there is no cause for alarm.' Sammy spoke with an air of finishing with the subject. 'It is a penalty of our calling that our customers sometimes display eccentricity. Sit down.'

He himself was sitting at his desk, in a familiar attitude, but as Julius now looked at him more closely he could see that there was an altogether unfamiliar air about him—not excitement exactly, but a kind of impatience, an enthusiasm.

'I am expecting a visitor soon.'

He's feeling damned pleased with himself, Julius thought with surprise.

'Well, what have you made of today's events, Julius?' Julius shrugged.

'Do you know why I staged this little comedy?' the bookseller persisted.

'It's scarcely my business,' Julius said, with a suggestion of the insolence he usually renounced in the presence of Sammy. 'What visitor?'

'We will come to that later. Do you not realize that we took part today in a remarkable display of brotherhood? A brotherhood of guilt, if you like, a parody of the holy, but brotherhood nevertheless, loyalty to each other and the common cause.'

The bookseller's precise enunciation might have been adopted to indicate satirical undertones to his words, but nothing in his demeanour pouched irony.

'And perhaps the chains that unite the guilty are stronger than the silken bonds of the righteous.'

For Julius such terms had no meaning; his face took on an expression of sullen resistance. Anyone else who had spoken thus, he would have dismissed as hypocrite or charlatan.

'Very well then, Julius,' said the bookseller. 'All is as it seems. Nothing exists below the surface. But can you read words in a woman's throat?'

Julius—he could not have said why—suddenly recalled the scene at the end of the service. 'Veronica, when . . .'

'Yes,' said the bookseller approvingly. 'That's right. I never doubted that you had a keen mind, however ill-trained. Say it.'

'She knew that Louise was going to shout out, so she . . .' Julius replied obediently. It was as if he were suddenly beginning to speak in a language he had never learned. 'What was she going to say?' He did not wait for an answer. He went on: 'But perhaps she muttered it under her breath first, people do, or . . . anyway, she's hysterical that girl, she imagined it. It was she who told you, not Louise. You'd have to ask her to be sure.'

Julius was surprised by his own agitation.

'For myself, I am inclined to believe her,' said the bookseller. 'Not that she read it literally "in her throat", per-

haps, but that she divined it, foretold it. That kind of communication is not so rare, at least among primitive peoples, uncorrupted by too much thought or false emotion.

'Or . . .' he went on, speaking now more as if to himself, 'or those who have been brought back to the body, the realm of pure sensation. For in a sick society the healers must adopt unorthodox methods.'

Surely now there was no irony. In the months he had known the bookseller Julius had never before heard him speak in such terms. He was too amazed to apply the usual apparatus of his scepticism.

'Would you also call Louise hysterical, Julius?'

On that point Julius was prepared to hedge, but the bookseller did not wait for his answer.

'For she was about to shout out that we were responsible for Webber's death. And that was something which you had suggested to me, you remember. The brotherhood of guilt—even you, Julius, are not so free from that infection as you might believe. Not quite so detached, not quite so pure in your independence.'

The bookseller looked at his watch. 'All that is to some extent, however, by the way. Something else happened today—an eventful day in many ways—which might be considered more important, which you would consider more important, Julius. Something concrete and practical.' The irony was now unveiled. 'As you may have noticed, Veronica was deeply upset by the thought that now, Webber gone, our activities would cease. This possibility terrified her, Julius. What do you say?'

Julius had made a gesture of contempt.

'Nothing,' he said. Perhaps, he thought, she needs the money or already, crazy as she is, she has developed a craving for perversity, an addiction. 'Nothing.'

'Because with us,' the bookseller continued, 'she has found something her life lacked before—call it, if you like, that same brotherhood of guilt—and to lose it now so soon would destroy her. This was what I wished to discuss with you, Julius.' There was a faint smile around the bookseller's mouth. He was turning a pencil between his fingers.

'She made a suggestion. It seems her friend is a photographer.'

'Well, you are a photographer, aren't you? You are a photographer.'

She was leaning over him, watching his face, her own face so close to his that she had to move her eyes to transfer her intent and calculating scrutiny from *his* eyes to his dry mouth. She was supporting her weight on her forearms, one resting on his bare chest, one on the crumpled pillow beside his shoulder, her small, schoolgirlish breasts just over him, and touching him each time he drew air into his lungs.

'You could do it, couldn't you?' Her voice was beguiling, cozening, plaintive—the voice of inexorable female insistence.

In the dead fog-light her body was livid, like the underside of a fish.

'Couldn't you?' A demon drove her. Looking from his eyes to his lips, she saw nothing of his exhaustion, his pitiful desire for peace, sought only signs of surrender, to force which, driven by the demon, she would bludgeon, bully, bribe.

'It wouldn't mean anything, darling, not to us. After this, for there's always this, for us, there's always this, marvellous with you.'

Unwittingly, she was using the technique of a hypnotist, the meaning of her words subordinate to the power of repetition, the direct appeal to the unconscious. Exhaustion of the spirit and the body drew down the veined shutters of his eyes.

'It would be just another job for you, a photographer. It wouldn't mean anything, darling. It doesn't mean anything to me. To me, there's only this . . . this.'

Reading his eyes and his mouth, she chose unerringly the right instant to let herself fall against him, dropping her head in the angle between his neck and shoulder, her mouth, her voice, close to his ear, her hands moving against him.

'Anyway, you could see him, couldn't you? You don't have to commit yourself . . . darling, please, for my sake, please . . .'

'Well, what do you say?' The bookseller looked up, still smiling.

'You don't mean . . .'

'Yes, the policeman, or the man you and I presume to be a policeman.'

'And she suggested it?'

'It was a complete surprise to me. How was I to know that he has claims to being a photographer?'

Julius smiled in his turn. 'What a laugh!' he said. 'How did you get out of that one?' But even as he spoke and smiled he realized. 'You're not going to . . .'

'He is the hoped-for visitor I mentioned.'

'You're not going to . . .'

'That still remains to be seen.'

Julius's sense of incomprehension and of outrage burst like an exploded lamp-bulb. He swore at the bookseller. After the explosion and the sharp slivers of glass had fallen, nothing—incredible as it might seem—had altered. Sammy still turned the pencil between his fingers.

'I'm sorry.'

'Julius, look at it this way. Let us take it at its lowest level, without mystical, metaphysical fancies. One advantage: a gamekeeper turned poacher; another: a spy in the enemy's camp.'

'A policeman,' Julius said. 'For God's sake, a policeman.'

'You are not convinced?'

'I suppose you know what you're doing,' Julius said coldly. 'I'm getting out of it.'

The bookseller ignored his last remark. 'The suggestion was made spontaneously by Veronica—not as a consequence of any prior contrivance between them. Will you give me credit if I assure you of that?'

'She's too silly, yes. But perhaps without her knowing, he might have . . .'

'No,' said the bookseller with emphatic conviction. 'That is one point. Now another: if he should agree this evening, he will be doing so on his own initiative. There will not have been time for him to have obtained his superiors' approval.'

'Why should he do it?'

'Perhaps he will not, but Veronica appears to think that she can persuade him.'

'But why?'

'My dear Julius, he loves the girl. Oh, I forgot—you do not believe in love. Very well then: policemen are not well paid. Or perhaps you believe in the incorruptibility of the police? But I pay well.'

Julius spread his hands. 'It's your show,' he muttered.

'And then . . . but you have never felt, have you, the particular power of our activities, their contagious attraction, their . . . Just one more item: once he has actually worked for us—if he does—then whatever happens, whatever change of mood or mind he might experience, it will be too late for him. He will still be bound to us.'

Decisively, the bookseller laid down the pencil he had been twisting between his fingers. He put his head on one side.

'You can get out of it whenever you want, Julius. You are a free man. I shall be sorry to lose you, but I never expected you to stay with me for long.'

Julius felt again that intangible, pervasive warmth, the mysterious attraction of the bookseller's authority. His pride, however, would not permit him to make any visible concession. To a degree he felt trapped, and resented it, as even the most happily married man might resent his happiness, yearning for a loneliness more acute than he has ever known.

'You had better go now,' Sammy said. 'I do not want you here when I interview our friend.'

## Chapter 12

THE object of their interview had not yet been mentioned. The bookseller had so managed the conversation that, even though they had no shared experiences or recognized common interests, they had been able to maintain an easy, neutral politeness, like two traders passing the time until it seemed proper to discuss the deal which had brought them together.

Bateman's air of stolid unconcern was not feigned. As he had shed his mackintosh on stepping within the crimson curtains, so he had shed the frenetic despair which had driven and accompanied him to the bookshop.

'Yes, all right then. Yes, I will.'

He had said it without knowing he had said it, staring blank-eyed into the white darkness of the ceiling, so that the intention—if it could be called that, rather than merely a relinquishment, a surrender to the insistence of her voice, of her hands moving against him—had been formed retrospectively.

'What you want, Veronica. Anything you want.' His voice sepulchral. 'Yes, yes.'

And with the realization of his committal had come a kind of relief, as if he had agreed to undergo a dangerous operation; having made the decision, or acquiesced in it, he was at the mercy of the will of others, of the surgeon's knife. The doubts and fears, the premonitions of pain and dismemberment had come later.

'I'll wait for you,' she had said, standing in the shadow of the doorway, the loose wrap she was wearing rendering her shapeless and insubstantial.

Her last words, blithely uttered: 'Good luck, darling.' Just as if he were off to be interviewed by any ordinary potential employer!

The curious opacity of the atmosphere, the fog-light, had tended to distort familiar landmarks, to create the effect of moving in a new and strange territory. A policeman, Bateman felt nothing of the emotions, excitement

and apprehension mingled, which a normal law-abiding civilian might expect to experience on becoming involved in affairs of criminality. For him, something far more fundamental was involved: it was not only that the step to which he knew himself now to be committed would take him over the uniquely narrow boundary which divides the policeman from the criminal; by the same step he was leaving behind an attitude, rigorously disciplined and puritanical, which had sustained and shaped him during the last period of his life. And it was from within the carapace of this attitude, this formation of the self, that he had now finally won the hope of love. How, stepping out from its shelter, could he expect—a new and naked self—to hold it?

This—not the cutting off of career and honour—was the threat poised by the surgeon's knife, the focal point of his despair as he made his way against the fuzzed light of the shop-windows, slipped between gaps in the roaring, clamorous streams of traffic choking the city's streets.

It had never occurred to him that he could turn back—here, for instance, caught in the smell of onions and spiced meats rising from the grill of a basement kitchen, a street-trader's barrow, the fruit improbably phosphorescent, blocking the pavement—for here, and from hereon, everything he did, despite despair, seemed only the logical and inevitable progression from that moment when he had first seen her, entering the bookshop, hopelessly inexperienced, her coat trailing.

He was her creature, demon-driven. Yet he was also still a policeman. Entering the narrow street of the bookshop, he remembered that the investigation had not been closed. He passed first on the other side of the road, pausing to look into the café in which he had himself maintained a vigil. There were several people within, but none whom he recognized as a colleague.

On the opposite pavement, a woman spoke to him. He went by without looking at her, only after he had passed registering surprise, for such women always recognize a policeman, however plain his clothes. Had he already ceased to appear like one? Had he already crossed over?



The shop had been in darkness, the door locked. He had found a press-bell high up, and the bookseller himself had opened the door.

He had been grateful for the delayed approach, which had given him time to make adjustments in his manner of thinking and apprehending.

Almost as soon as he had stepped within the curtains his professional habit of observation had switched itself on automatically, so that, as a doctor may see a man in terms of the diseases he supports, he regarded the bookseller in the categories of a suspect's description: age, about fifty; height, five feet, seven inches; brown hair, full at the sides, receding . . .

Nevertheless, the polite trivialities of their conversation added to the effect of unreality, of a dreamlike inconsequence.

'Well, so you are a photographer, Mr Bateman.'

Sitting comfortably back in the arm-chair, a glass in his hand, Bateman nodded. Then he said:

'I'm not an expert.'

He had almost been taken by surprise. The bookseller had brought them to the purpose of their meeting with a smooth abruptness.

'I understand. An amateur. You are not in employment as a photographer?'

'A kind of freelance—among other things,' Bateman said vaguely.

'Yes. You have had experience with a cine-camera?'

'Not a great deal, but I've used one. I haven't got my own, I'm afraid.'

'I expect we would be able to resolve that difficulty.'

The bookseller's manner had made his questions seem perfunctory. Bateman, watchful, awaited the probe that would draw down his guard. Samson smiled at his visitor, as if about to share a secret with him.

'A simple matter engaging a photographer—but one does not wish to make a mistake, and then regret one's choice. There are so many opportunities for regret; it lies at the heart of all our dramas. I sometimes think, incidentally, that we construct our little dramas, our little

mysteries as if to give our minds something to do, to fill in the emptiness.' He went on briskly: 'Miss Barclay told you what we do here, Mr. Bateman. I must ask you this: you do not condemn our activities, do you?'

'Condemn!' Bateman repeated.

'But then you would scarcely be here if you did. Let me put it another way: you do not think that if you join us you might in time come to regret it? You might, for instance, discover moral scruples you never knew you possessed.'

Bateman thought the bookseller was trying to provoke him. He took refuge in silence. Samson laughed.

'To condemn or to regret,' he went on, 'it is a common dilemma. During considerable experience of court proceedings in various countries, I once—just once—encountered a judge who evidently disliked his position. I loved that man. He had chosen regret—the more rigorous choice. True he lacked the initiative or the courage or the pride or for that matter the self-respect to give up what he was doing, but he who was at least reluctant to condemn others should, I felt, himself be left uncondemned, be left with his regret. That is by the way. You have not set yourself up as judge of our activities, have you, Mr Bateman?'

Bateman, suspicious, still said nothing.

'But in your case it is not so simple as that.' The bookseller leaned forward. 'There is your relationship with Miss Barclay.'

Bateman broke his silence. 'Look, I'd hardly be here if I didn't want the job, would I? What do you think I've come here for?'

'I apologize,' said the bookseller. 'I have, of course, no right to pry into your motives. But you will appreciate that it is not only for my own sake but also for that of the others involved that I have to feel confident about your discretion.'

'You needn't worry,' Bateman said crudely. He felt suddenly deeply disturbed. With the rending of the veil of inconsequence, he was thrown back to a realization of what he was doing. Good luck, darling!

'You needn't worry about my discretion. You said it, didn't you, I'd scarcely be here if I didn't want the job. Do you think I'm the sort who'd shout his head off about it?'

There was an element of play-acting in his bluster. It was necessary that he should behave like the man he was supposed to be; on the other hand, he genuinely felt he had endured enough. There was a confusion in his mind, a kind of dusk, in which it seemed he was trapped at the end of a narrow cul-de-sac, the bookseller, his smiling, menacing oppressor, drawing slowly closer.

For the first time, Bateman consciously observed the bronze owl on its marble plinth: its cold gaze seemed to contain a similar threatening omniscience, stripping his pretences and leaving him naked and vulnerable.

The bookseller spread his hands. 'Then all that remains is for us to discuss payment. Would you care for another drink first?'

He had another drink; they settled the matter of payment.

'I'll be frank,' said Bateman. 'That seems very generous.'

Samson's gesture brushed this away. 'I can afford to be generous. The profits of this trade are not inconsiderable. They are also in proportion to the risks one takes. You would not be worried by those risks, Mr Bateman?'

It was said pleasantly enough, but it seemed to Bateman, already uneasy, that the words presented a sneer or a threat.

'I've agreed, haven't I?'

'The police are, of course, always interested in our activities. Society is very disapproving, and the police as agents of that society are constantly harrying us.'

He seemed to have finished what he was saying, but he went on suddenly, with a deeper ring to his voice, as if—and probably for the first time that evening—he were now speaking from his complete self, from out of the profound well which contains a man's most cherished beliefs and aspirations.

'Do not think that I am complaining. I would not wish our trade to be legalized.' His eyes were brilliant. 'It

belongs to the dark underside. Bring it into the light and it would lose its therapeutic powers, lose its magic. We would not—should not—seek the support of society, but social and anti-social, like Christ and anti-Christ, are only two ways of saying the same thing. It is a matter of faith.'

Bateman's incomprehension, or his distaste, must have been apparent in his expression.

'Of faith and of perception and of temperament. You do not have to understand me, Mr Bateman, but you have been needing me as I have been needing you. I was in your future long before you met me this evening. We always find our own.

'Do not look so angry. You think you have come to me for your own good and sufficient reasons. I say it was necessity which brought you here.' The bookseller stood up. 'I drink to a fruitful and happy co-operation.'

## Chapter 13

HE was a mile away, without knowing how he had come to be there. The wide street, narrowed by the tall buildings on each side, was almost empty. It was quite dark now, but the atmosphere was clear again, with only a slight, lingering reek of dust or smoke, which had resisted the thin night breeze.

The traffic lights at the intersections all the way up the long, straight road changed and changed again in compulsive rhythm, but only an occasional car passed him, gliding along uninterruptedly, so that when one was stopped by the red light it seemed a fictitious hazard, like an obstacle in a dice and counter game. His footsteps had an empty, echoing ring. When he passed an entry, a dog ran out, barking, and followed at his heels for ten yards or so.

He found himself repeating phrases which had been uttered at the interview behind him. It did not seem to matter whether they were his own words or the book-seller's—in a way, it seemed the same thing—and perhaps some of the phrases had not been spoken at all, but only might have been by either one of them; and that seemed the same thing too.

There was a sense, he realized suddenly, in which he had been here before: the same empty street, at the same instant, under the same circumstances. Not in fact, of course, the same circumstances, not at the same point in time and space, but *reflectively* so, so that the present moment was like an image of an instant in the past.

When he had first become aware of his wife's infidelities, shock and his bitterness had driven him to long despairing walks through the night streets. He had walked to assuage his despair in exhaustion—his despair and his anger.

For Bateman was a passionate man: not sensual, but passionate. Then, as now, he had repeated mindlessly within his head the words he had said to him or those he had said to her . . . or those which then, too, only might have been said.

Then, as now! But there was a difference, if only he could identify it.

He passed a window which was a glare of light, obliterating the foreshortened shadow in front of him, cast by the street-lamp. He was sweating coldly. There was nothing of the measured pace of the policeman about his walking now; he was striding out quickly, fretfully, as if he felt space itself were inimical. Or he felt as if somewhere within himself a dam were threatened, as if a raging torrent were on the point of sweeping everything away.

Then, as now! How nearly it had come to the point then when everything would have been swept away. Although not an imaginative man (not sensuous, but passionate; not imaginative, but introspective) he had never afterwards been able to regard the lawbreakers he encountered with quite the same professional attitude of profound, impersonal contempt; for there stayed with him the interior knowledge that he was capable of anything. Only he knew how closely the enormities within his mind had come to being translated into action.

Reaching one of the intersections, where the traffic lights ticked through their sequences unregarded (like clocks, still running, where time has stopped), he turned arbitrarily into another street—still broad and cavernous, but a little more animated, with the lights of a public-house ahead of him, and on the other side of the road a man and a woman coming out of a doorway and entering a car.

The car swung round in the road, its lights curving over him.

He entered the public-house unthinkingly. This, too, was an action out of the past. By drinking rapidly, not spirits but pint after pint of strong beer, he had been able partially to deaden his hatred and his anger, hold back the impending torrent.

Emptying his first glass, he rapped loudly with a coin on the counter, repeating his order without speaking.

Abruptly, with the glass still half full, he put it down, swung round and left.

There was really no point in his drinking. The difference between then and now had come to him quite suddenly,

with the clarity of something that has always been known although unacknowledged. There was no hatred now, no anger, no urge to violence. The only common element was fear, which in the end came to fear of himself; and its menaces were not to be quenched by alcohol.

Despite the debilitating fear, some of his tension had left him—as if carried away on his visible breath. He turned at the next corner, walking now with an objective.

The moment of his madness—or, rather, potentiality of madness—had passed. He was able to regard himself with a certain clarity, a grim derision. He had been affected by the madness of the bookseller, the pretentious theatrical rubbish that he talked. To think that, however briefly, he had permitted himself to be impressed—impressed by a back-street pornographer!

Then what was he himself doing in permitting his involvement? That was a different matter.

It was at this point that a new confusion, a twist in the mind's power to deceive, overcame Bateman. He had become involved because Veronica had wished him to; that was straightforward enough, and not to be denied. But also, he told himself, he was a policeman, who was doing that which he was doing in his capacity as society's protector and avenger.

He did not put it to himself in such grandiloquent terms: in effect, the rationalization was simple: he persuaded himself that, despite Veronica, his actions had been governed by a policeman's cunning: he had joined forces with the pornographer to expose him and destroy him.

One other element entered into the confused pattern of truth and deception which he had created: for the first time he felt a physical revulsion from the activities of the bookshop, the lewdness, which—remarkably—was associated in his mind, not with Veronica, but with the lewdnesses of his former wife; and with the revulsion, the first warm and luxurious stirrings of attraction.

She was sitting in the darkness, dressed as he had left her, wearing only a wrap. The room was over-heated.

'Don't put the light on,' she said—even before he could raise his hand to the switch.

'Kiss me before you tell me.'

He came over to her obediently; despite her demand, her mouth was dry and unresponsive.

'Well, it's all right,' he said with uneasy nonchalance, straightening. 'I'm on the staff. He's not mean with the money, is he?'

She made no reply. He took a few pointless steps about the room, and removed his coat, throwing it down on a chair. He felt a sudden desire to make love, but was inhibited and daunted by her unfamiliar stillness.

'Why don't you want the light on? Sitting here in the dark!'

'I didn't think you'd come back.' Her voice was thin and remote.

'I live here, don't I?' he said. 'Where did you think I'd sleep tonight? Underneath the arches?'

'You were never coming back to me.' She felt it was like a dream, one of those dreams in which the un-real, the essentially dream-like, was closely integrated with habitual actions. 'I thought I had lost you for ever.'

Half-consciously she was acting out the dream, hoping that he in some unfathomable way would participate in it with her.

'I don't understand you.' He was only a clumsy shadow moving meaninglessly in the darkness. 'What is all this about not coming back?'

She sighed histrionically.

'What is all this, Veronica? I've done just what you told me you wanted me to do, and now I come back and find you . . .'

It was warm and comfortable within the dream. She resented him for not entering it too, for threatening its existence by his blindness.

'It's all right, I tell you. He's taken me on.'

She said nothing.

'Veronica, what is the matter with you?'

Something of his profound exasperation penetrated the cloud enveloping her.



'Oh, I know I'm making a fool of myself. You don't have to tell me.'

It was his turn to say nothing.

'I shouldn't have made you do it,' she said in self-accusatory anguish.

'Well,' he said, 'for God's sake! It's a bit late now in the day.'

'I shouldn't have made you,' she said again. 'I know you didn't want to, but I made you.'

Over and beyond his exasperation with her, almost his fury, Bateman felt a sense of failure and of betrayal—as if, to save her, he had braved some enormous danger only to find, having come through, that she had never been in need of rescue. He switched on the light.

Veronica let out a little cry of protest, blinking. The dream was shattered.

He was red in the face and scowling, standing with his arms bent and hands clenched so that his two fists were pressed into his stomach, as if he had been caught at a moment of acute indigestion.

'To change your mind now like this, it's a bit bloody late in the day.'

'Oh!' she cried delightedly. 'Oh! You've never sworn at me before.' An evasive, self-regarding smile appeared on her face. She went on rapidly: 'It was terrible sitting here waiting for you. I thought I'd done wrong making you. I thought if Sammy took you on and you came, I'd just never be able to do it, with you there with the camera, watching . . .'

He looked as if he were about to explode, hunched up, holding all his muscles stiff. She leaned back her head, still with that calculating, private smile, and loosened her body, with the effect of a ripe fruit falling.

'Or that, darling, you'd feel, watching me . . . you wouldn't want to see me like that.'

There may be no one element common to all humanity; but all women everywhere have the gift, the fiendish power simultaneously to entice and aggravate—so obscurely apprehended the exploding Bateman.

'You don't feel like that about it, do you, darling? Tell

me truly. Because I don't now anyway. I think perhaps even I may like you being . . .'

He *did* explode. At least, she was suddenly enveloped by him, grabbed unceremoniously from the chair and bundled on to the couch. Although subsequently his actions entirely lacked their customary solicitude, she did not appear (the same serpentine smile fixed throughout!) displeased in any way, either during or after.

A little later they were indulging in relaxed lovers' confabulation, elliptic and mysterious, subjective to the point of incomprehensibility. They did, however, speak calmly and more reasonably than ever before about the venture they were now involved in together. Veronica described the activities of the studio and told him about her companions, embellishing her account, as was her way, with the intuition and guess-work and invention which her dramatic sense demanded. She spoke also about her own emotions.

'Of course, I've changed since I started it. I'm not the same girl any more, but it's not at all like what I'd expected it to be. I mean—well, it's disgraceful and all that, I know—but somehow it doesn't seem like that. It seems, well—how shall I put it?—fun.'

Bateman, his tension gone, his head resting against her warm side, began to say something, but before he had formulated two words, she, with a lover's insight, had interpreted and cut him off.

'No, I don't mean just that. You're so crude, darling. And . . . it's sort of innocent.

'Yes, really it is.' Her voice took on that special quality, a kind of tentative solemnity, which by now he knew to portend the approach of graver matters or the outflow of her fantasy.

'And there's something else too. I don't know how to make you understand. It's not just innocence. That's a negative thing, isn't it? There's something positive too. If it didn't sound so funny, I'd say like . . . holiness.'

Despite the warning of her tone, that took Bateman considerably by surprise. He half-remembered something the bookseller had said. It is a matter of . . .

But she went on: 'I don't mean like church and all that, but in the way of something deep and serious and . . . finding yourself.'

A matter of faith! Or a matter of words. Do words contain any objective meaning, or are they just the mind's private amulets?

'It was Samson, wasn't it?' Bateman said.

'Sammy? What was?'

'Samson who said that. About holiness and finding yourself. I thought it sounded like his line of phoney talk.'

'Oh, well, perhaps it was,' said Veronica. 'But all the same . . . You're not jealous of him, are you, darling?'

'Jealous! Of him? Don't be ridiculous.' But even as Bateman said it—in all sincerity—he wondered if in fact he were, although not in the ordinary sense of the word and not in the interpretation she placed upon it.

'You don't know Sammy,' she said.

'Do you?'

'He really is the most extraordinary man I have ever met. What were you saying, darling?'

'I said: do you think you know him?' Bateman's thoughts were running ahead. 'You've told me all about the others, but you haven't said anything about him. The others, how old they are and what they work at and everything, but that's all you've said about him—that he's extraordinary. After all, he's running the show, isn't he? He's the man we're most concerned with.'

Veronica said nothing.

'Well?'

She moved her limbs fretfully, turned her head.

'Well?'

'I don't think any of us, anyone can really know him.' Her voice had changed again: it was puzzled, strained.

There was a bird-cry in the night. Could it be an owl in the urban streets?

'I mean,' Veronica went on, 'most people, when you see them a lot, see what they do, hear what they say, you can get a good idea what sort of people they are. But not Sammy, somehow. He will always be a . . . a mystery.'

The cry was repeated; perhaps it was not a bird at all, but some night animal.

'And yet, in another way . . .'—she was still moving restlessly—'you feel you know him well, or a part of him anyway, as if he were a part of yourself. Because he understands you so well, I mean, you feel he must be like you are yourself.' She spoke as if she were making discoveries as she was going along. 'Or you are like he is. But that can't be right, can it? Because he is like every one of us; he understands us all—the good things and the bad. But what he's like inside himself, what he's thinking, what he wants to do with us, no one knows. In that way, I mean, he's a mystery. I don't think we shall ever know, even . . . even when it's all over.'

Veronica remained silent for a moment, then she sat up, saying: 'Oh, what a day it's been!'

## PART TWO

### *Chapter 1*

IT was a warm, bright morning. At this time, even in the heart of the city, something of the night's freshness lingered in the air, but later it would become—as it had been for the past few days—oppressively hot and dry, with, in the early evening, high clouds banking up, containing a thunder which never quite broke loose.

Julius nodded, unsmiling, as he passed one of the neighbouring shopkeepers, who, wearing only a grimy white vest hanging loose over his trousers, was dragging boxes of vegetables into his shop.

'You want to get up in the morning.'

Julius ignored this. Unhurried, he opened up the bookshop and set about the few routine tasks which always began the day.

Having moved some ten days previously, he now found it difficult to get to work on time. It was not only that he had further to travel; his new ménage was overcrowded and this created early-morning complications.

The move had come about when his West Indian friend had been arrested and sent to prison for two months for being in possession of Indian hemp. Julius could not afford to keep the flat on by himself, and there was no one whom he felt inclined to invite to share it with him.

Or perhaps it was not that! At the time, it had seemed like a sign . . . a cue. He was accustomed to allowing such exterior accidents to regulate—to retard or precipitate—the comings and goings of his life. His intuitive feeling that he was due to move on—like a bird at the time of migration—had slowly been growing more insistent.

When he had come to the shop the day after Princeton's sentence he had been calmly resolved to tell Sammy that he had finished. He had even known where he was going: to a seaside resort at the other end of the country, where he

was sure that he could work on the fairground until the end of the season.

Yet he was still here; and Sammy had not even attempted to dissuade him.

Now, flicking the dust, which rose to dance in tunnels of effervescence, from the shelves of books, Julius wondered with a faintly disturbed bewilderment how it had come about.

It had been a day just like this; that is, a day for which a studio session had been arranged—perhaps it was the coincidence which led him now to recall it. He had told Sammy first thing. The bookseller had accepted his decision without demur.

He had said, even: 'Yes, I think I had been expecting this, Julius. I have been feeling for some time that you were beginning to chafe.'

They had all come in after that: Bertie, Louise, Veronica and that damned policeman. Afterwards, the first three had left together, but the policeman had remained behind with Sammy. On some faint pretext, Julius had intruded upon them once. Bateman had been speaking, but, whatever it was he had been saying, he stopped as Julius came in.

When he finally left, Julius burst through the curtains.

'What did the copper want?'

'I asked him to stay for a talk,' Sammy had said, unruffled.

Julius had forgotten what he himself had said next. He had been in a state of extraordinary agitation.

'As a matter of fact,' Sammy had said, 'I thought at one moment that he was ready to tell me.'

'Tell you what?'

'That he is a policeman.'

'Tell you!'

'However, he retreated at the last moment. But I think the time is coming if I work on him a little. What is the matter?'

'For God's sake!'

'Of course, you do not trust him, do you?' Sammy had said, smiling. 'However, as you are leaving, my dear, this is something that I can . . .'

'I'm not leaving,' Julius had said, to his own amazement. 'I've changed my mind.'

'Because you hate Bateman so much?'

Yes, Julius thought, he hated him; but it was of the bookseller himself he was thinking mainly now, having laid aside his duster and sitting at the table in the cool shadow at the far end of the shop.

He was not yet prepared to admit to himself the strength of the emotional hold which the bookseller exerted upon him. Although he had acknowledged hate, he was not yet prepared to admit jealousy and love.

Having for so long accustomed himself to ignoring the individual characteristics of other people, Julius found his mind inadequately equipped to analyse the true nature of the bookseller, whose powers seemed to his assistant—ill-educated, limited in experience and imperceptive, as he was—to verge on the supernatural. Instead, he assembled, mixed up with memories of remarks which Sammy had made, the odd fragments of fact about his history which, in one way or another, Julius had learned.

For instance: that he was born—some time before the first world war—in Germany, of an Australian father and a Hungarian mother; that at various stages of his life he had lived in at least four continents, and had known the gaols of two of them; that he spoke nine languages with varying degrees of fluency; that among his trades he numbered, beside his present trade of pornographer, chemist, carpenter, financier, journalist, conspirator, teacher . . .

Yet even the superficial mind of Julius found this inventory unrewarding, insubstantial—like a naïve illustration of a fully developed character in a novel, the representation accurate in detail, but irredeemably attenuated and misleading.

His mind wandered again, returned to—

'Because you hate Bateman so much?'

'I don't trust him.'

Sammy had laughed. 'And you are going to stay merely because of that? To guard me, to guard us all from that untrustworthy policeman? What has happened to the pure and uncommitted Julius?'

Julius, who normally detested to be mocked, accepted this.

Sammy went on: *'Imperturbable and serene the ideal man practises no virtue; self-possessed and dispassionate he commits no sin; calm and silent he gives up seeing and hearing; even and upright his mind abides nowhere.'* He quoted with a grave yet flowery eloquence.

'That is how I have always thought of you, Julius: the ideal man—in potentiality, at least. What has happened? Do not, please, destroy my faith. Do not start to practise virtue.'

(How would the illustrator convey this intrinsic element of Sammy's features? With what subtle shading blend the humour, irony and tenderness?)

'Anyone can change, can't they?' With his own attempt at humour, Julius added, 'Even for the better.'

'Depending on whether one knows what the better is. The intelligence, you know, ceases to develop after the age of sixteen. From the age of twenty-five—certainly thirty—onwards it begins to deteriorate. That is an established fact. So if you are aware of change in yourself, it is probably a change for the worse.

'It is significant,' Sammy had gone on conversationally, 'that that is a fact not more widely known. Of course, it disposes of a number of pretensions, so perhaps it is not surprising that it is promulgated less often than in one's innocence one might expect. I have never, for instance, heard a septuagenarian judge, bishop or philosopher acknowledge it.'

He had patted Julius on the shoulder. His tone was only minimally different. 'But I am glad you are staying. I would not have tried to have kept you, but I am glad. I believe I can trust Bateman, but I know I can trust you.'

Recalling this now, Julius was surprised to detect within himself, not the reluctant glow he had experienced then, but a flare of resentment.

'I should have gone.'

His mind jumped again—to the unsatisfactory nature of his present accommodation. He was sharing one large flat with six other people, including two women, sleeping



himself on a couch on the landing. He did not object to the couch, but the careless promiscuity seemed a further abuse of his proud inviolability.

He jumped up from the chair, as if snapping the threads which enmeshed and compromised him.

Shortly afterwards Sammy came in.

Within the studio the suggestive plywood props, the mirrors and the masks and the costumes of fetishistic illusion had been laid out, like tarot cards, to be shuffled into their sequences of symbolic and libidinous fantasy. The pornographers were in session.

Julius served a youth with some illustrated magazines. Then, on an impulse, he entered the studio.

The powerful lamps bathed the room in a white incandescence, like an operating theatre, within which the naked flesh had the chill inhumanity of unweathered sculpture.

Upon his entrance—or with just that slight interval, like the pause between the shot and the falling animal—the marble frieze crumbled, dissolved into humanity. Before the shot the plunging animal had had the grace and dignity, the *abstraction* of its rhythm; the bullet bringing it low had disclosed the squalid and pathetic frailty of the flesh.

‘Yes, Julius, what is it?’ Sammy spoke from a chair beside the camera on its stork-legged tripod.

Julius muttered something incomprehensible and stumbled out.

He was amazed to find that his body contained this physical capacity to recoil. When he had been present previously at a studio session his attitude had been merely one of disdainful indulgence. His face felt hot and damp. Apart from everything else, he was furious with himself.

When he pushed aside the curtains he did not at first see the man in the shop, which had been empty when he had left it a minute before. Indeed, although he was only a pace or so away from Julius, the customer was almost hidden in the smaller alcove behind the shelves.

Julius wiped his hand against his forehead. Something

alerted him to the other's presence—he could not have said what it was.

When Julius turned, the customer smiled 'thinly and said: 'I'm just looking round.'

There was no need for him to have spoken. In this shop people—customers—seldom uttered an unnecessary word. That was a general rule; but there were some, of a particular type, Julius remembered, who were possessed of a nervous garrulity. In case this was one such, Julius moved down the shop, inventing a task at the rack of paper-backs by the door. Even that was a weakness, a reflection of his disturbed state, for ordinarily he was quite capable of snubbing the most obsessed of talkers.

In a little while he heard the customer moving behind him, but when he spoke, just by Julius's elbow, his sudden presence came as a surprise.

'I'll take these.' He was not being deliberately arrogant; his tone was that of a man who could not keep arrogance out of his voice when addressing someone who was evidently unimportant and poor.

Julius took the books from him: both were rather expensive examples of their specialized type.

'Two pounds, thirteen.'

He took them to the table to wrap them; the customer followed at his leisure. Julius had not looked at him yet. He did so only as he pushed across the package. Until then the customer had made no attempt to get his money out.

He was wearing a double-breasted grey suit, which he unbuttoned slowly to extract his wallet from the inside pocket. He held the wallet ostentatiously in front of him—and thus under the eyes of Julius—as he opened it. Clearly, it contained a considerable sum of money. He removed a five-pound note from a wad of its kind and held it out, smiling with relish.

Julius looked at him bleakly. He had small eyes, obscured by heavy lids. The entire lined and pouched surface of his face was of a uniform mat tallow, except where the capillaries had burst around his sharply pointed nose.

Julius took the ~~note~~ without speaking. It occurred ~~to~~

him suddenly, as he was getting the change from the drawer, that perhaps he might know this man. He looked up at him again. No, he was sure that he had not seen him before. Why then had he thought that? It was something about the other's expression: a complacency—he was holding himself as if he expected to be recognized. Julius counted out the change.

'It's your pictures I'm really interested in,' the customer said, still smiling. 'Your own productions.'

He glanced down at the open wallet in his hand as if surprised to see it there.

'You've got the wrong place, chum,' said Julius.

He put the change on the table.

'Not as my friends tell it to me.'

'Two pounds, seven,' said Julius, turning away.

He certainly was not a policeman; on the other hand, this was not the manner of a usual would-be customer. Their approaches varied, but they always had in common an air of complicity.

'They've had some good stuff from you, they tell me.'

His attitude was too confident, almost threateningly so. The reference to 'friends' was, however, standard procedure.

'Who are your friends?'

The customer laughed. 'They wouldn't be for long if I told you, would they?' he said. 'I'm not the sort of man to give his friends away.'

'You'd sell them?' Julius asked blandly.

The other man's smile, unconvincing from the start, acquired a new degree of falsity.

'Come on,' he said, 'we've played about long enough. I haven't got the day to waste. I know I've got to pay through the nose.' He pushed his wallet towards Julius. 'You don't think I came just for this tripe'—the hand with the wallet rested on the package of books—'I want the real stuff.'

In any event, Julius had his orders: he himself could act under such circumstances only within very narrow limits.

'You've come to the wrong place,' he repeated, with finality.

At last the customer allowed the rictus of his smile to fall.

'You're wasting my time,' he said. 'I'll see your boss.'

If his mood had been different, Julius might have been enjoying this. Normally, to deflate a pompous and overbearing antagonist ranked high in his scale of pleasures.

He said, as insolently as he could: 'As far as you are concerned, I am the boss.'

This one evidently had a high opinion of himself—but yet Julius derived little satisfaction from observing his chagrin, manifested in the tightening of his mouth, a sharp intake of breath; nor even, and this would normally have been a yet more refined pleasure, from observing his attempt to conceal his anger and maintain an appearance of amicability. Indeed, he swung over to a blatant attempt at flattery.

'You're a bright boy, you'll go far. I mean it, and you're right, couldn't be more right, to be careful. It wouldn't do, would it?' He left what would not do to be surmised. 'But there's no point in playing with me. I know what goes on in the back here. Tell you what, whatever a good one costs, I'll give you a fiver more for yourself.'

Julius stiffened—not from outraged honour; several warning signals had been posted.

'What goes on here?' he said, playing for time.

'As if you didn't know.' He lunged forward; he must have thought he had found an unexpected opening. 'I've got my sources.'

Six months ago certainly, a month ago perhaps, Julius would not have felt this alarm; for it was not at all on his own account. Was it then for Sammy? Or for their corporate enterprise?

Julius's mind was working quickly. He could not fetch Sammy now—while a studio session was in progress. He could not leave this customer alone in the shop. He would not have put it past the man, with his domineering effrontery, to follow him through if he were to go into the studio.

You'd better come back some other time—that was what he should have said, would normally have said. Was

it because of his own confused state or because of the violent antagonism that this man aroused in him that now he erupted, 'like one who lacked control, quite unlike the customary Julius?

'Get to hell out of here, you'—stumbling for the effectively offensive epithet, which usually came easily to him—'you broken-down . . .'; not finding it, and trembling with, maybe, anger.

He had placed himself at a hopeless disadvantage. The other, although not smiling now, was in easy command of himself.

'What's your name, sonny?' The question was an implied threat, like a falsely solicitous enquiry about his health.

Obviously, he did not expect an answer, for he went on immediately: 'I must say, you've been very silly. You'll regret it. If people play along with me, I'll . . .' He had picked up his change, but not the package of books. 'If they don't they pay for it.'

'You've forgotten your books,' Julius said, having recovered himself sufficiently to make this sound contemptuous.

'Oh, yes, I'd better have those.'

He came back and took them from the table.

'You'll be hearing from me again.'

He looked hard at Julius, as if about to amplify this hackneyed melodramatic phrase, but Julius held his gaze and achieved a silent sneer. He went out of the shop, the books under his arm, leaving Julius muttering the imprecations he should have uttered before.

When he thought to follow the man to the door he was too late, seeing only a car pulling away. There was no certainty that it contained his visitor.

The special relationship between Veronica and Bateman was acknowledged by the others. They went off by themselves, leaving Louise and Bertie together.

'What about a drink? Or shall we have lunch somewhere?

'I've got my mother staying with me,' Louise said. 'I've got to get back.'

'Just a quick one.'

Louise let out a long breath. 'It's like an oven, isn't it? All right. I could do with a drink.'

'I know a place,' Bertie said—he was anxious to please—'they've put some tables in a sort of courtyard. Very continental. You wouldn't expect to find it round here.'

In fact, the surrounding brickwork held and concentrated the heat, so they were probably less cool than they would have been inside.

'It's just like an oven,' Louise said again.

People generally seemed to be finding the hot weather oppressive, as if it were difficult to make the necessary physical and temperamental adjustments so unusually early in the summer.

Louise knew she ought to be on her way home but, although she recognized a conventional love for her mother, she found her presence increasingly an irritation. She had not in any event recovered her former state of well-being; the scene in the chapel at the cremation of Webber lingered only half-submerged in her mind; her thoughts were often concerned with death. So far as the masquerades of the studio went, a kind of inertia held her now, a fatalism, for she felt that they were bound to lead to disaster, but could not summon the energy to renounce them.

Bertie, by contrast, now that his drunken indiscretion had apparently brought no consequences, was his old self. In an imperceptive way, however, he was aware of Louise's discontent and would have had it otherwise.

'Seems to have settled in, that chap of Veronica's,' he said cheerfully. 'Not so good with a camera though as poor old Webber.'

This brought no response. He tried again.

'Funny how young Julius burst in this morning. There's an odd character for you, can't fathom him at all.' He stretched back. 'Very introverted, I suppose.'

After a studio session Bertie always felt relaxed and secure, at home, in a sympathetic world. Louise used

to be the same; but not now. It was not just the heat, he thought, seeing her limply extended, her head fallen back, eyes half closed, the damp, bluish pallor of her face. He put his hand on hers, resting on the table.

'What's the matter, Lou pet?'

She shook her head silently.

'Tell Bertie. Trouble at home, eh?'

'It's going wrong.' Her voice was low and toneless; the words seemed to be drawn from her, as if by a hypnotist or under the influence of a drug.

'What's that?'

'All wrong,' she repeated, 'everything. It's going to come to . . .'

Bertie was gazing at her in wide-eyed incomprehension. He himself was conscious now of the dry airlessness within the courtyard.

'Don't say you don't know it too, can't feel it. Ever since Webber, the funeral. It's only a matter of time before . . . it's all going smash.'

'Don't get it, don't get it at all,' Bertie said.

'Before . . .' She had sat up, and appeared surprised herself by what she was saying. 'Before someone else, like Webber . . . someone else coming to an end.'

The day's dry heat; female hysteria; husband trouble maybe; it was not like old Lou, but Bertie was not disposed to allow himself to be upset for long.

He was not due to go to work until that evening: behind him the studio session, with the curious sense it gave him of completeness and superiority; before him idle hours, the prospect of which was enhanced by his knowledge that most people were working. He strolled slowly along—not quite purposelessly, because for some weeks he had been savouring in anticipation the fulfilment of a long-held dream, which each day now brought nearer. He was going to buy a motor-car.

Indifferently paid in his work and with the expenses of his tastes, he had always been impecunious; the dream had seemed to belong to a remote and improbable future.

Now, with the money he received from Sammy, he was in a position to put down the deposit on a good second-hand model and—so long as the studio sessions lasted—to keep up the payments and maintain the running expenses.

The possession of a motor-car, with the independence it conferred, its utility in the sphere of amorous exploits, its symbolic significance in terms of power and superiority, would, he felt, consummate the process which had started when he had first met the bookseller: his acceptance by the world.

So, now, his steps took him to the car showrooms and the yards of second-hand dealers. With the realization of his dream in prospect, he was prepared to wait months if necessary; he thought that when he saw the car that was destined to be his he would recognize it immediately, like a place that one has seen only in one's true dreams and then comes upon with a sense of wonder.

He had struck up an acquaintanceship with one car dealer near where he lived and finally he called upon him. The man, a young and energetic Scot, was busy when he arrived, but Bertie waited happily among the banks of polished cars, peering inside them and studying the price-cards marked on the windscreens.

'Got my baby yet?'

'Just got something in might interest you,' the dealer replied.

He led Bertie over to a car and they examined it together. The technical jargon was like a private poetry.

'Haven't tried it out properly yet,' the dealer said finally. 'I can make half an hour. Like a run?'

He let Bertie take the wheel after a while. Without being very experienced, he drove easily, naturally. He enjoyed the drive and thanked the dealer warmly when they returned to the garage; but he knew that he had not yet found the motor-car of his dream.

'I'll keep my eye open,' the dealer said.

'You do that. You mind you do that.'

Bertie went back to his digs to wash and change and eat and prepare for work. He was halfway up the stairs when his landlady called him from below.



'You're just too late,' she said. 'You've just missed her. When she rang the first time I told her you'd be back by four and she rang again on the dot, but you've just missed her.'

'Who?' said Bertie, descending.

'Half-past one it was the first time she rang, I was just washing up.'

'Who?'

'And twice this morning when I was right at the top—you'd think some people would learn to use the phone—there was a wrong number.'

'Who was it?' said Bertie.

'One of your harem,' said his landlady. 'One of your little two-by-fours. Anxious she seemed too.' She cackled. 'I don't know what you've got makes them so keen.'

'All right,' said Bertie happily, 'we won't go into that. Just tell me, dear—who was it?'

'She wouldn't say. Both times I asked her but she wasn't telling.'

It could have been any one of many.

'"It doesn't matter," she said. Ah, I thought, you're married, gal. La-la sort of voice she had. You'd think . . .'

'Did she say she'd ring again?'

' . . . she'd got a plum-stone in her throat. When I told her this time you wasn't in I asked her if she'd like to have your office number. "Never mind," she said. "It doesn't matter." '

She cackled again. 'I reckon you've missed a little bit. She said, like she was talking to herself . . .—raising her voice, the landlady attempted a farcical impersonation of the caller's tones—"Well, it's his bad luck. I can't keep ringing." '

The landlady jabbed at Bertie's ribs with her forefinger. 'Sounds like you've missed a little bit of it tonight, don't it?'

The sea was full of fish; relaxed and confident, he had the skill to hook any he wanted. He was only mildly curious, not at all disturbed.

'Can't be helped,' he said. 'If she's that eager she'll be back.'

'Do you good to lay off of it a bit,' said his landlady. 'You're wasting away.'

Louise was late home. Somewhere she had picked up tar on her shoes, which transferred itself to carpets and rugs before she noticed it.

The tears came to her eyes then and she had to lock herself into the bathroom so that her mother would not see. Even then outside the door, as she bathed her face in cold water, her mother's voice was continuing, its harsh timbre, the flat vowels (which Louise herself had lost somewhere unnoticed along the way), the note of persecuted complaint not only a present affliction but the voice also of a hated and oppressive past, re-creating its fears and frustrations, a threat to everything she had achieved.

Louise for herself never bothered with a large midday meal, but her mother had been accustomed to it all her life and so while she was staying with her Louise met her wishes. Because Louise was late her mother had begun to prepare the meal and they worked together in the kitchen now; as both had different methods, however, this led to conflict and irritation. In fact, Louise's mother tried hard to restrain the criticisms which came naturally to her lips; equally, Louise tried hard to suppress her irritation; but their ways had grown so far apart that their shared inheritance served not to unite but to separate.

'It may be cleaner I grant you, all right, I don't say it isn't, but when it comes to a stew give me gas any time. These electric things you can't . . .'

A widow now, living with a sister for whom she had little affection, her mother took the opportunity of her visits to her daughter to release the torrents of words dammed by her loneliness—the outflow of her grudges and prejudices, which sprang from her desperate but unacknowledged need of love.

'Mother, every time you come into the kitchen you say that.'

When the meal was prepared Louise found herself

almost unable to eat. She took only a small portion, but after a few mouthfuls had to push the plate away from her. Her mother ate with a careless unfastidious greed, which, despite her familiarity with it, now nauseated Louise.

'What's the matter? What's wrong with it?'

'I'm not hungry,' Louise said. 'It's the heat I think. It's like an oven.'

'You don't eat enough,' her mother said, herself still chewing. 'I said that when I came, didn't I? I said you didn't look well. You've lost weight too.'

'I'm not used to a large meal at this time,' Louise said desperately

There was a thin dribble of gravy from the corner of her mother's mouth. Louise shut her eyes suddenly and turned her head away.

'All of half a stone I shouldn't be surprised. And this funny job you've got it's too much for you. Running a house is a full-time job for any woman. You've got good money coming in.'

'Excuse me, Mother.' She was on her feet, turning towards the door. 'Leave the things. I'll do the washing-up.'

Lying supine on the bed, she felt the beads of sweat breaking through her skin in a kind of repetitive rhythm and tingling sensations in her body, moving from limb to limb as if forming some obscure pattern.

Later, when she rejoined her in the sitting-room, her mother (after what interior struggle, resolved renunciation!) made no mention of the dinner-table incident. The windows were wide open; a slight breeze stirred the curtains, giving at least the illusion of a greater coolness. As a kind of protection, Louise had picked up her newspaper—the paper of her horoscope in fact, and also the paper for which the journalist Bassett wrote: I FOUND A J.P. AT THE HOUSE WITH GREEN CURTAINS, read the headline bordering his sinister profile.

'Valerie Clark—well, she's Broadhurst now—had a baby last month. You know he's a draughtsman at Lacey's . . .'

Her mother's voice ground on: Louise paid no more

attention to it than to the newspaper to which from time to time she bent her head; by the tone and the inflections she knew when to interpose some neutral, meaningless comment.

'Thinks she's lady of the manor now she's got her daughter married to that lawyer chap.'

It would not be quite accurate to say her thoughts were far away; rather, a series of disconnected images superimposed themselves within her mind, a jumble of impressions, like a constantly re-shuffled pack of cards.

'A solicitor, isn't he?'

Perhaps she was actually ill, she thought suddenly; she welcomed the idea.

'I never thought much of him either, though they've made him a partner and all now if you please—not since that time when . . .'

Malice now and envy made up the dominating theme of the gossip and reminiscences of this shrunken woman who had, when younger, possessed much gentleness and charity.

'Oh, and I meant to tell you, funny me forgetting, but when you're my age your memory isn't what it used to be you'll learn. I read it in the paper, and I said then, I told Doris, I must tell Louise . . .'

She was hearing although she was not listening: to put it another way, her mother's words registered themselves within her mind although she paid no conscious regard to them; so that when the first word did impinge, with a sharp and painful shock as if a dentist's drill had touched a nerve, she could dredge up instantly the words which had been uttered before, to complete the terrible and shattering story.

'You never saw her again, did you, after that time she came to stay with us? That was when we was still in Henderson Avenue. You couldn't have been more than, what, seventeen, were you, you'd been at Critchley's a couple of years.'

After the first shock, the nerve outraged, she felt dazed and hollow. It was as if the most profound, the most secret recesses of her being had been violated.

'I knew it was the same girl—after all, it's quite a common name, Margaret Saunders, it could have been someone else—because her father he gave evidence. A retired cotton broker, the paper said, chairman of the . . .'

Something extraordinary was happening to Louise; she might have felt the same sensation if she had been told, for instance, just as abruptly and casually that she herself had only been adopted by those she had always thought to be her natural parents: it was not just that the self she had always believed herself to be had died—it had never existed.

'Spoiled she was, of course, that was her trouble, after her mother died, but I couldn't help feeling . . . Poor girl, it seemed this man she married was an alcoholic and he treated her . . .'

Then came the precise images summoned up by her mother's words: but it was the girl of eighteen she saw—not the grown woman whom life had treated with such grotesque cruelty—huddled, broken on the beach, salt and sand in her eyes, her ears, her hair; cast up by the same sea that had been the ever-present background to their happiness for those two weeks those years ago.

Louise asked her mother no questions, contrived to make just such neutral comments as she had previously.

After a little while her feelings defined themselves more sharply: the sadness, the pity, the regret—but with them also something indefinable (this came a little later), a sensation such as one feels when a rocket soars into the blue night sky, a kind of fearful liberation.

## Chapter 2

LEANING side by side on a low wall, they watched a young man in a canoe just below them struggling to make progress against the current. There was a look of desperation on his face. On the other side of the river—wide here, outside the city—the tents pitched on the field running to the water's edge shimmered in the haze of heat.

Bateman had had to tell her. For weeks now his habitual reserve, the acquired caution of his training had been fighting a losing battle against the absolute necessity for honesty.

'Yes,' she said, 'I see. I should never have guessed that. I wondered why you worked such funny hours. I understand now.'

Did she understand? To take his long deception so lightly, to accept his painfully reached confession with such casual tolerance!

He had to go on. 'I know something about photography, you see. I suppose that's what put it in my mind. In fact, before I came here, in another force, I used to be a police photographer, which . . .'

She put a hand on his arm, interrupting him.

'That was all?' Her face was bright. 'You told me once, you remember, before the funeral, there was something you'd said about yourself which wasn't true. I was so worried—I didn't want you to see it—but I thought . . . That was all? That was all it was then?'

'That was all,' said Bateman.

Perhaps he should by now have learned to accept the inherent differences in their scales of values.

'I thought . . . perhaps you were still married. Or something. And all this time! Are you a detective or just an ordinary policeman? I suppose you're not supposed to tell anyone, you always have to pretend to be something else.'

'It isn't quite like that,' Bateman said, still speak-

ing slowly and carefully. 'But I don't want you to think that there was any subtle motive behind my saying photographer.'

'I know you're not subtle, darling.'

'I mean, that I had chosen it deliberately in order to get into Sammy's studio.'

She withdrew her face, pulled back so as to be able to focus upon him.

'Oh, God!'

'No,' said Bateman.

'If I thought that,' said Veronica, a look of fear or horror in her expression, 'it would mean that perhaps you took up with me just in order to . . .'

She stopped of her own accord. He was not looking at her; his eyes still rested on the muddy surface of the river—the canoeist had passed some distance upstream—; but after a moment he felt the tension leave her, as if what she had seen in his profiled face had reassured her.

'That isn't quite all.' Having begun, he had to follow it through to the end. 'When I first met you, I was in fact keeping observation on the bookshop.' He thought that she might not have understood the formal expression. 'I mean officially. I had been detailed to watch and report on Samson and everything that took place. We've known for a long time a great deal that's been going on, and it has been only a matter of collecting proof.'

She still said nothing.

'I was taken off it a little later. I'm on other duties now. Just a sort of desk job, in fact.'

He wished she would speak.

'I had to tell you. I've been wanting to tell you for a long while, because it isn't right that there should be—he did not know quite how to put it—'that there should be anything but frankness between us.'

Her laughter took him by surprise. Then she threw her arms around him and kissed him boisterously.

'You fool, you solemn old fool. And to think of all those stories about myself I used to tell you—before I really knew you—and all the time you were telling me . . .'

She released him and stopped laughing.

'But if they catch you—you a policeman yourself? Why are you doing it, James, why?'

Because of you, to be where you are, to share all that you experience: he could not say that to her; and there was more besides which he could not explain even to himself.

'Policemen are the same as anyone else,' he said instead, as lightly as he could manage. 'Both as men and in the eyes of the law.'

She seemed to consider what he had said. (A swan floated beneath them now. Like the canoeist, it appeared to be forced backwards by the current, but one could see from its relation to other objects that it was, in fact, making slow progress upstream.) Although lately she had grown a great deal more stable, more predictable in her responses, he was again utterly unprepared for what she had to say next.

'When you were lying, you weren't lying to *me*.'

'Well,' he said, 'only accidentally.'

'Yes,' she went on, delighted. 'I was the same. I wasn't really lying to *you*. I mean, as a person. You knew that, didn't you? Knew I couldn't help it. It was the same thing with both of us—only in a different way, of course. I think, perhaps it's the same with everyone. If there's something you have to hide, you have to make up stories. And everyone has something they have to hide.'

It seemed that there was nothing else she wanted to say about it all.

'Look at that swan.'

But he had not quite finished. 'I'm going to tell Sammy.'

'Tell Sammy? Why?'

'Because I have to.' He added something which surprised himself: 'He would expect me to.'

'It's quite a young one, isn't it?' said Veronica. 'What's the word—a cygnet? You can see the grey feathers on its neck. I'll try not to tell you any more stories, darling.'



### Chapter 3

As it happened, Bateman's shift was unexpectedly altered, involving him in a succession of nights on duty. This had the advantage of facilitating his attendances at the studio, but, despite his long experience of working at night, he had never grown fully accustomed to the different regimen which it entailed. In particular, he found it difficult to sleep in the daytime, especially now that the weather was hot. Working inside made it worse, for he was not physically tired, although his mind became drugged and exhausted by the tedious, repetitive nature of his employment and, like an imperfect mechanical toy, it seemed to tick on when it should have been unwound. All these factors led to certain physiological changes, in themselves trivial but which, allied to his mental exhaustion, radically upset his sense of balance and proportion, distorted reality, so that at times he felt deranged, hallucinated.

A minor instance: coming off duty one morning, he caught a bus to where he had formerly lived; having arrived there and realized his error, he had to go into a café and sit down for some time before he could bring himself to make the effort to work out how to return to his present flat.

He was not able to spend as much time with Veronica as before. Confident now in their relationship, they both found this a matter for discontent rather than apprehension; but Veronica suggested that she should come to live with him. At first, she seemed to fail to appreciate the force of the police regulations which forbade such an arrangement; for himself, their authority and validity seemed tenuous, questionable now in a way which would have been impossible only a few weeks before, but he was reluctant yet directly to challenge them, feeling that—as he put it to himself—he was heading for trouble enough without inviting additional difficulties.

In a way he was like an adolescent who feels the approach of the time when he must break with the parental

authority which he has accepted for so long, but is unwilling to do so until the emergence of an issue of sufficient intrinsic importance to reinforce the gesture's symbolic significance. If that is a correct interpretation of Bateman's attitude, it is probably not too fanciful to say that the discipline of the police force had, like the discipline of a father, protected him during the years when he was insufficiently equipped to stand by himself; but that now he was growing to—or, perhaps, in his case, recapturing—the independence of manhood.

He awaited the occasion of rupture with an instinctive confidence but a superficial trepidation.

'Let's wait and see what happens.'

That is what he told himself, and also what he told Veronica. She, her own confidence also mounting, came to accept this.

Sometimes she would meet him when he came off duty and they would return together to his flat, where she would prepare breakfast. They would talk for a little while and perhaps make love—strange these episodes of love-making: the gaudy morning sunshine bathing the room, the whirings of vacuum-cleaners and other domestic noises from the neighbouring flats, the bright clatter of a world about its business!—before she drew the curtains and departed, leaving him alone in the suddenly darkened room to seek a sleep which when it came at last would be shallow and dream-haunted.

On one such morning he told her that he had arranged to see the bookseller alone that evening.

'To tell him?'

'I'd been putting it off. This shift made it difficult.'

'Let me come with you,' she said.

He refused.

'But then I shan't see you at all tonight before you go on duty.'

'It's only the one night. Meet me again tomorrow morning.'

'Suppose he's . . .'

'Suppose he's what?'

'Oh, you know.' She was twisting a strap of her apron

around her finger. She burst out: 'He's capable of anything.'

'What do you mean? Do you think I am in danger?' said Bateman, amused.

She shrugged, confused by what she had said.

'I thought you liked Sammy.'

'I do, but . . .'

'But?'

'He . . . he has no conscience,' she said. 'I mean: he will do anything he wants to.'

They let the subject drop. Later, however, she asked Bateman to allow her to stay with him throughout the day.

He refused. 'You know what we agreed.'

Again, she did not persist. She left soon afterwards. Then he began to wish that he had let her stay.

Sleep that morning seemed more than ever remote. The noises from the street and from the flat above were louder, more maddening; the shafts of light slicing through at the edges of the curtains dazzlingly bright; the room an airless, claustrophobic box, upon which the whole building pressed in. He tossed and sweated under a single sheet.

After a time he fell asleep, only to be woken by an extra loud clattering outside. Then for a long while he lay in that uneasy mid-way state between sleep and waking, thoughts and images repeating themselves in his mind in an unending monotonous rhythm. When, finally, having got up once and returned to bed, he did fall deeply asleep it was as if he were drowning—in water from a contaminated well, poisoned at the source, infecting him with the corruptions of guilt and anxiety.

He awoke greasy and startled, his eyes sore. The sun filtered through the room so thinly that he was worried about the time, but it was some minutes before he could bring himself even to reach out his hand for his watch. He had not overslept; the sky had clouded over, a dusty heat haze changing the quality of the light.

More than ever he felt that sense of distorted reality, or, rather, of a reality that was there outside himself and with which he could make no communication. He was terribly thirsty, his mouth and throat metallic. And something of

the anxiety of his sleep lingered on, affecting the way he moved and touched things.

He washed and shaved and ate some of the food which Veronica had left for him. He had plenty of time.

When he went out the streets appeared for some reason to be unusually empty; where everything had been bright, it now appeared leaden. Perhaps while he had been sleeping some terrible calamity had occurred, of which he was almost the only person not to have heard. He did not really believe this, but he bought an evening newspaper and simply looked at the headlines on the front page before discarding it.

The mere process of walking and contact with people and familiar sights tended to diminish his sense of strangeness, but elements of it remained, so that when he came to the bookshop he was like a man at that point of a fever at which a hypersensitive lucidity shades into irrational apprehensions.

He had not expected Julius to be there, and felt some disappointment. It was not that his presence would be an impediment to what he had to say to the bookseller, but it would dilute their intimacy. Samson poured a drink for him and put the glass in his hand.

'We were talking about our customers. Julius was despising them. I mean, he was despising them in particular, more than he despises the rest of us. What was it?' The bookseller turned to where Julius was deeply sprawled in an armchair. 'A substitute, you said.'

'A substitute for living, if you like.'

'A substitute for living,' the bookseller repeated. 'So of course are many of the accomplishments and pastimes which the world regards most highly: the enjoyment of music, for instance, or an interest in politics or watching football matches; or perhaps even the performance of any of these. But you could say with equal truth that anything that is in life is living.' He had seated himself while talking, in his customary chair at his desk. He smiled at Bateman. 'What do you say?'

It was like coming late to a party at which the central conversational theme has already been developed, so that the newcomer, unaware of what has gone before, finds it hard to concentrate and comprehend and feels a sense of exclusion.

'Perhaps we all need substitutes of one sort or another,' said Bateman.

'You believe that, too? How far we have come then from what we like to consider to be man's natural state!' The bookseller's tone was reflective yet enthusiastic; he was revealing an aspect of his character which Bateman had not seen before.

'At least those whom Julius despises are aware of that, are conscious of loss and of imperfection. For we are watching the disintegration that takes place when no common morality inspires respect, and the sexual revolt is merely the symbol, the first manifestation of a more complete rejection.'

More and more as the bookseller was speaking, Bateman felt the sense of total strangeness—such as he had experienced when he had come out into the street and some cataclysm had destroyed the familiar world. Yet the strangeness was also familiar, like coming to a place once known but long forgotten.

'And as society imposes more and more virtue upon us, so the illicit and the anti-social become increasingly enticing. Consider again the customers for our productions, who . . .'

Bateman found it impossible to concentrate on what the bookseller was saying: his head was swimming, and the words entered his consciousness in intermittent surges.

' . . . and, watching, they feel a nostalgia for lost innocence, for perfection, for the days—if they ever existed except in his dreams and aspirations—when man was potent and proud and everything could be done without disgust or satiety.'

The bronze owl provided a point of reference, like a light in a dark tunnel.

'And they know that now, even if the time and the place and the loved one were to come together for themselves

there would always be one missing element, that they are themselves too hopelessly corrupted ever to emulate the innocent celluloid lovers.'

A greater passion in the bookseller's voice here imposed his words again.

'One element missing—an element for which there is no name. But in what one might take for, in what they themselves believe to be, groans of disgust or cynical obscenities one can hear the cry of man seeking a lost paradise.'

He dropped his hands on to his knees in a gesture of finality, his gaze moving from one to the other of his listeners, and now the familiar ironic smile indenting his mouth.

'Which we, of course, do our best to supply. It is always a great aid to one's self-esteem to believe one is fulfilling a noble mission.'

The bookseller reached out towards the wine bottle on the table beside and a little behind him.

His head was thus averted as he said: 'Well, Bateman, why did you want to see me?'

There was never total silence anywhere in the city: day and night the persistent hum of the traffic provided a constant, although only occasionally noticed, accompaniment to all thoughts and actions.

'Give me your glass.'

Bateman obeyed automatically.

'I wanted to tell you . . .' he began. The simplest way was the only way to do it. 'I am a policeman.'

The bookseller filled the glass and handed it back carefully.

'I wanted to tell you,' Bateman repeated.

He was aware that Julius—out of his range of vision—had made an abrupt movement.

Samson was now filling his own glass. He took a sip from it and placed it gently on the desk in front of him. Only then did he look directly at Bateman.

'So what happens now? Do you charge me here or do I have to come down to the police station with you?' He leant back in his chair, putting his hands on his arms as if in order to lever himself up. 'It would not be the first time,

but the formalities vary from country to country, from town to town even. I must be careful, mustn't I? Anything I say may be taken down and . . . and so on and so on. That is the formula, isn't it? I am ready.'

He threw back his head and laughed, dropping his hands into his lap.

'I am sorry, Bateman. Your expression was too revealing. I thought policemen were trained to inscrutability.'

'You knew then,' Bateman said.

He felt a wave of anger, a petulance—like a child who has made great efforts to learn his party-piece and finds that to his adult audience it is only a joke.

'We know all about the shop, what goes on in the studio.' Just momentarily, in his petulance he had transferred his allegiance, rediscovered old loyalties. 'I was watching you, on a detail. If you say you knew, then . . .'

'We did not know,' Samson said, in a mollifying manner. 'Say, we suspected. We were waiting for you to tell us.'

Bateman's anger had passed as quickly as it had come; in retrospect it seemed faintly ridiculous. But now he felt a saddening bewilderment, conscious again of his weariness and the loneliness of alienation—as when, coming off night duty, he had taken the bus to where he had formerly lived and could not concentrate his thoughts to work out the new direction.

'We had to, you understand. Until you told us yourself, without any hints from us, without any pressure, we could not feel . . . certain of you, certain that you were one of us.'

The place was familiar; it had been the right bus; only he had moved on, and so place, bus, time had become allies in his confusion.

'Until you told us, you understand, you could not even know yourself'—the bookseller's gentle voice had the persistence of a tape-recorder and something of the same disembodied quality—'know for certain that you had renounced your official loyalties finally, beyond resurrection, had sold yourself to the devil. You could still have persuaded yourself that you were merely—what do they call it?—an undercover agent, or even, on a different level of morality, that you were working just for the money

and so could betray us unfeelingly as a straightforward business transaction when it appeared expedient.' He paused momentarily. 'Or that you were doing it simply for Veronica's sake.'

There was something for him to fasten on to—a sign-post, a map reference. If only he were permitted to concentrate for a few moments!

The bookseller's voice continued, however, with the nagging insistence of a voice in one's own head—such as dominates in the dramatic unspoken dialogues of spiritual conflict.

'... to save her perhaps, or to win her, or merely to involve yourself in her disaster. You could still be persuading yourself that you despised us and our activities; that you were with us, but not of us. I had to wait until you knew that you belonged to us ...'

'Belonged!' Bateman cried, outraged. 'What do you mean, belonged?'

'It was more important that you should believe in us than that we should believe in you. By belonged I mean that you are one of us, body and mind and soul, and that with us alone can you find and live with your true self.'

'I cannot ...' Bateman began, 'I do not ...'

'You see, it is only a matter of how you look at it. In our small way ...'—there again was the modesty which was also arrogance—'we are liberators. If one alters, however minutely, the angle of vision, then the essentially arbitrary nature of the ordinary way of looking at things becomes apparent. Not only our laws, our morals, our customs are shown to be accidental creations, but also all our emotional and spiritual responses, the entire method of apprehension. This is illustrated by the works of certain artists in all media: to portray merely from the accepted viewpoint is to limit and to falsify the ultimate reality; it is the "distorters" who are the life-enlargers, widening our cosmic horizons.

'Of course, you find it hard to acknowledge at first—so many years of false preconceptions to discard, so much confusion over the real nature of good and, even more, of evil. Would you agree that war, say, is a worse evil? Yet it



cannot be denied that some men, perhaps even more than are conventionally supposed to, find in war their only way to self-fulfilment.'

No, no, no—Bateman wished to repudiate it all. He wanted to wound, Samson was not invulnerable: the right word, if it could be found, would destroy him and his vain pretensions.

'And do you not think,' the bookseller was saying, still quietly, but with an added earnestness in his voice, 'do you not think that if a new Christ were born His doctrines and activities would seem to society as outrageous as those, say, of a pornographer?'

'You are not saying, not claiming that . . .'

'Oh, no,' said the bookseller. 'They do not crucify us. But do you not—I ask you in absolute seriousness—think it likelier that He would be a pornographer or a pimp than a statesman or a lawyer or a . . .'

He broke off, laid back his head and laughed. 'You need not worry,' he said. 'I am only talking metaphorically. I am not suffering from delusions. I do not identify myself with . . . Well, I see I must be more careful with my comparisons.'

If only he could find the right word! He had an inkling of it, but it just evaded him.

'Before we leave the subject altogether, however,' Samson went on, 'let me develop my thought just a little further. Society, we are agreed surely, disapproves, would disapprove of its new Christ, but even while they were nailing Him to the Cross . . . '—he was speaking with a particular fastidiousness, as if to underline the fanciful nature of his thought—'there would be those who knew in their hearts that He was their Redeemer.'

'Do you follow? I mean that it is a natural human characteristic to condemn most violently, to destroy more often than not, that of which we have the deepest need, or its personification. The scapegoat fulfills an essential function.'

'And do not forget'—his eyes twinkled behind his spectacles—'while it was the part of the disciples to succour and support and to spread the Gospel, one of them was the betrayer.'

Cheapjack! That was the word he had sought—with its slightly anachronistic flavour, its suggestion of a market-place mountebank, glib in deception, his satchel and cavernous pockets bulging with useless potions, unguents and specifics . . . Cheapjack! Charlatan! These words (which Bateman had probably never in his life uttered) seemed to rise naturally to the surface of his mind, where he could polish them and hold them ready, like magic incantations which would, when required, reduce his adversary to a puff of smoke.

Later, he told them in greater detail about the nature of the police enquiries. He had come now to the phase succeeding a fever, in which a dull irritability supervenes and the meaning of objects and concepts has drained away. His eyeballs felt hot and strained; he had a frontal headache.

There came a sharp and hostile challenge from Julius, delivered from the same slouching position. Bateman, as a policeman, still a policeman, could—he suggested—yet earn credit by denouncing them. He added a threat about the complicity of Veronica. The bookseller let him continue for some time before intervening. When he did so, suggesting that Julius's suspicions were unfounded, the assistant, resuming his familiar disengaged manner, made a grudging admission that he was now prepared to admit Bateman's reliability.

Bateman no longer cared: distrust or acceptance were equally void of significance. The room seemed remarkably stuffy—as a sickroom does very often.

Next, the bookseller invited Julius to describe for Bateman's benefit the appearance and behaviour of two recent callers at the shop, whose attitudes had aroused suspicion. Bateman, back to some extent on familiar ground, listened carefully: the descriptions—one of a young man who had accosted the assistant at the door, the other of an aggressive customer who had offered a bribe—meant nothing.

In answer to further questions, he was able to say that the behaviour of neither was consistent with police procedure.

No, it was unlikely that if the police were using civilians to purchase on their behalf that they would be so persistent.

A photograph of the shop's exterior? Julius explained his suspicion that he had seen someone take a flashlight picture from a stationary car. Bateman could not see how that would provide useful evidence. The pain above his eyes had concentrated in a sharp point in the centre.

No, he was no longer in a position to keep in touch with the police investigations . . . He could not say if they were active at the present time . . . Such information as came his way he would, of course, pass on instantly.

Then it was time for him to go. He felt deeply lethargic, inert. The bookseller was standing up.

'Thank you for coming to see me. I always trusted you absolutely, so it would be pointless to say I trust you more now. I am, however, very grateful to you. I hope you have not resented our importunate questions. If I let Julius voice his suspicions, it was only on the principle that exposure to the light would shrivel them up. I think that this must have cost you a considerable effort. Thank you again for your help.'

He held out his hand, as he did sometimes greeting someone or leaving them, in the Continental fashion.

Outside, it was a shock to find that it was still light and almost equally so to return to the clamour and the vibrations of the traffic. Sounds seemed to carry farther at this time. The sun must almost have set; he could not see it because of the buildings holding their positions in space, but its dying flames illuminated their upper stories and seemed to cast their reflections on the faces of passers-by, giving them an appearance which was at one and the same time strangely feverish and also contented, as if they had come to accept death's imminence and inevitability.

As a postscript to this chapter, I (the author) would revert again briefly—and for the last time—to the dialogue between the Tempter and Adrian Leverkühn.

*' . . . According to you I am speaking with black Kaspar,*

*which is one of the names, and so Kaspar and Samiel are one and the same.'*

*He: 'Off you go again!'*

*I: 'Samiel. It giveth a man to laugh. Where then is your C-minor fortissimo of stringed tremoli, wood and trombones, ingenious bug to fright children, the romantic public, coming out of the F-sharp minor of the Glen as you out of your abyss—I wonder I hear it not!'*

*He: 'Let that be. We have many a lovelier instrument and you shall hear them. We shall play for you, when you be ripe to hear. Everything is a matter of ripeness and of dear time. Just that I would speak of with you. But Samiel—that's a foolish form. I am all for that is of the folk; but Samiel, too foolish, Johann Ballhorn from Lübeck corrected it. Sammael it is. And what signifies Sammael?'*

*I (defiant, do not answer).*

*He: 'What, ne'er a word but mum? I like the discreet way in which you leave me to put it in German. It means angel of death.'*

Bateman—it should be remembered—from police records knew the bookseller as Samson (or Samuels). He was, of course, unaware of the various sobriquets with which through history popular fancy has invested the Tempter; there is, however, a deep well of knowledge below the level of consciousness (as has been disclosed by hypnosis, for instance) and one of the more remarkable features of this untapped well is the degree to which it contains the fables and the idioms of common mythology.

The dictionary meaning of the name Samson is, incidentally: of the sun, solar.

## Chapter 4

IT was an extraordinarily radiant summer. For weeks on end the sun shone for most of every day. When the weather sometimes broke, as it had to, it did so in the form of electrical storms of varying degrees of violence which generally lasted only an hour or so, leaving the sky clear again and the atmosphere fresh and transparent.

The pattern of people's lives reflected the meteorological conditions, assuming something of the lucidity and uncomplicated hedonism of those races which are accustomed to perpetual sunshine; something of the melancholy, too, which is of a different nature—more an affliction of the nerves than the spirit—from the melancholy of those who are used to northern rains and mists.

Many people were on holiday: if the windows of a house were shut it could safely be assumed that the occupants were absent, for those who remained at home needed all the air they could get to cool buildings which were not designed for high temperatures.

Although so many people were away from the city, the accident rate rose sharply: not only traffic accidents but all forms of mishap, as if the unfamiliar sunshine made people careless, reckless even of their personal safety. There were several gorse and brush fires at the edges of the city; when the wind was in the right direction the smoke from these, although not visible, could be smelt in the streets—like the smoke from the camp-fires of a besieging army.

In the streets, too, the tang of tar and oil and dust hung sweet and heavy. Smells generally took on a different, more pungent quality. Characteristic was the sugar-sourness of alcohol lying, as it were, in blocks across almost every pavement, where the bars and public-houses had their doors and windows open.

Another feature was an increase in crime and violence. This could not be entirely explained by the greater facilities offered by empty or open houses, or by the greater

amount of drinking. The street fights, the sudden assaults in the parks at night were a part of the same recklessness in the air as led to the gashes and broken limbs and scalds of unintentioned mishaps.

The other side of the picture was the crowded swimming baths, the small boats of all kinds on the river, the girls in their crisp and brightly coloured summer dresses, children sucking ice-creams, lovers uninhibited in public places—the pageant of pleasure.

And, of course, the work of the city—holidays, summer laxity, the demands of pleasure notwithstanding—went on. The pornographers, too, continued to practise their trade. In fact, without giving any explanation, the book-seller arranged additional sessions.

Could it have been that he had an inkling that time was limited, that they had to make—in a phrase which was on the lips of a lot of people, in a different context, during those days—hay while the sun was still shining?

They were all available. Louise and her husband had decided that they could not afford to go away for a holiday; he was, in fact, doing some out-of-term coaching. Bertie was a town man anyway; he felt lost away from people and places he knew and his trips were limited to girl-hunting weekends at the crowded seaside resorts within easy reach of the city. Veronica had no wish to be separated from Bateman, and the policeman could not arrange leave at the present time. To Julius holidays in the ordinary sense had no meaning; when the time came he would move on anyway.

He had already moved in a more limited sense: oppressed by the sheer weight of numbers in the accommodation he had found, he had now taken a room of his own in a dilapidated house not far from the bookshop. His was an attic-room at the front of the five-storied building. He had access to a balcony, only some two or three feet wide, and the wall came up almost to his chin, but at night especially he would spend hours alone there, staring sightlessly at the chimneys silhouetted against the purple sky, his mind almost a blank, his spirit alone exploring the barren, austere and beautiful cosmos it inhabited. If he

wanted to look down into the street below he had to stand on an old box; so drastically foreshortened, the passers-by seemed to be moving jerkily, like characters in an old silent film.

No 'making hay' for Julius: he was merely waiting, held only by his attachment to the bookseller. Perhaps even this had passed its peak—or, to put it another way, he was outgrowing it, as a boy outgrows a pair of trousers, or a youth a second-rate philosopher or poet. Or as some men—just a very few—outgrow the need for any props! He had purged his antipathy—call it hatred or suspicion or jealousy—to the policeman during the course of the interview in the bookshop; that was another mark of his emancipation.

Each moment, good or bad, meant the same to him; bliss was born out of the acceptance of a continuing and hopeless despair; and without hope there could be no fear.

He remembered something the bookseller had said, thrown off casually while they were sorting some new stock:

'You see, something is happening now which has happened before at certain points in the world's history: it is not too portentous to say, a new kind of man is being created, with new feelings and responses so unlike the old that to us they are not recognizable as such; and for whom the old moralities, the old religions, the old arts no longer have any meaning at all, even a meaning that can be repudiated. Perhaps, for the first time, this man may even create his own values.

'I serve the old; you and those like you, Julius, are precursors of the new man.'

If that were true, it had the value of a fact, just like any other fact; it conferred no special rights or virtues, no cause for pride.

'You have wondered why I did not ask you to play a more active part in the proceedings of the studio,' Sammy had continued. 'I have only ever chosen those who possess a natural need and aptitude, those who have, however unwittingly, been seeking that which I can offer them. Not you, Julius—your sensuality has been diverted into other

channels, where I cannot follow. Our timeless trade has existed as long as man, but I sometimes wonder whether the new man will have need of us—or, rather, of our successors.'

Each moment the same—beyond pain or pleasure!

One night when, still in his shirt-sleeves, he was leaning on his balcony, Julius's stoicism—if that is the right word for it—received a setback: without any warning, he was smitten by a most acute attack of toothache, piercing his jaw.

He had tended always to despise those who were ill or in physical discomfort, feeling that such pain must at least be willingly accepted, if not overtly desired. He was compelled to revise his outlook.

That night he went to a nearby chemist and bought some anodyne. With its aid he was able to get two or three hours' sleep. In the morning the pain was just as bad.

He had no regular dentist so he went in at the first brass-plate he saw. The dentist was a man of about forty-five or fifty, but he had the skin and the movements of someone much older, with a despairing hesitancy about his actions suggesting that he was an alcoholic or suffering from some other nervous disorder.

The extraction was a bloody and violent business, which left Julius's jaw swollen and tender for several days. However, it healed in due course. What Julius could not know was that the incompetent and frightened dentist had left several pieces of the infected root buried in the gum—where for the time being they festered painlessly.

Something else which Sammy had said had impressed itself upon Julius's mind. They were not, in fact, the book-seller's own words: he was translating from a book which he was scanning.

*'I hate virtue that is only smugness, I hate the frightful morality of the world, and I hate it because it ends, just like absolute cynicism, in demoralizing men and keeping them from running their own lives with their own just measures of meanness and magnificence.'*<sup>1</sup>

That admirable, if over-passionate, passage contains a

<sup>1</sup> These are the words of Albert Camus.



warning particularly applicable to you, Julius,' Sammy had commented. 'I refer to the correlation of moral smugness with cynicism. Do you understand me? In the end there is little or nothing to choose between them.'

'That makes me smug?' Julius asked.

'For you that is the great danger,' Sammy had replied. 'Cynicism has to come first, it is an essential stage in the process of revolt and liberation, but one has to pass through it as one has to cross the sea to get from an island to the mainland. Some are drowned in the sea without ever reaching the mainland. I would not have you drown.'

Julius had simply shrugged his shoulders. The bookseller's remarks had, however, made an impact which even a month before they would not have done; they would have seemed then either incomprehensible or utterly irrelevant to himself and his existence. He recognized the change in himself: it was as if he had begun to learn the outlines of a secret code.

A curious thing was that, as Julius's understanding developed, his respect for the bookseller, his uncritical admiration diminished. His affection grew with the discovery of hitherto unsuspected flaws. Vanity, for instance! Julius saw it manifested in words and actions which had previously seemed wholly disinterested, and grew to seek it out with something approaching tenderness, as a lover's fingers will probe a blemish in the perfection of the loved one's body.

He watched the bookseller's dealings with other people with a new eye, in particular his relationships with the pornographers, for Julius believed that it was in the orbit of these that Sammy lived out the essential drama of his existence.

What took place in the studio Julius did not know, for after his previous experience he had no wish to intrude again; but the comings and goings, the off-stage activities, as it were, developed a fresh interest for him. He observed that Sammy was stepping up the pace, and he commented upon it.

'The demand is increasing,' Sammy replied. 'It is our commercial duty to attempt to satisfy it. A monopoly—

not that we are quite that, but we hold a leading position in the industry—has responsibilities as well as privileges.'

That ironic evasion effectively deterred Julius from probing further. In fact, even within the sphere of his observation, the demand did appear to be increasing. Apart from their regular customers—the majority of whom were in any event supplied by post—the number of casual visitors to the bookshop had risen considerably. Not so much in the daytime . . . but in the evenings, the warm, summer evenings when, although the sun had withdrawn its tigerish dazzle, it sometimes seemed as hot as in the afternoon, as if all the brick buildings, like so many convector-stoves, had stored up the heat of the day to release a torrid, colourless diffusion neutralizing the cool mauve of the twilight.

Sometimes the narrow shop would be nearly filled, men of all ages—jacketless some of them—lining the shelves, scanning, peering, occasionally breaking away to bring their selected volumes to be wrapped at the table where Julius or Samson, and quite often the two of them, would be waiting to serve; or sometimes, in their own individual fashions, to ask for volumes which were not on display. Customers they had never seen before—a different type almost, or so it seemed to Julius; at least, a broader cross-section of the restless men who, enticed by the miraculous warmth, wandered the dusty evening streets of the city! It was easy to imagine that, wandering, seeking they knew not what, they might find their attention attracted by the bookshop's gaudy covers and startling titles, and then that they might be encouraged by the number of men already within the shop.

A different type—no, that was certainly a simplification, for there was no single type. But, whereas normally all the customers, no matter what their age or their social or monetary standing, seemed to have in common a kind of solitariness—not furtive necessarily, but private and taciturn—now there was an air of gregariousness and frankness. Groups of men entered together; there would be chatter in the shop, occasional bursts of laughter. It was as if this extraordinary summer had altered the laws

of the land or at least set them in abeyance; had released unfamiliar desires, stronger than the prohibitions of society and the law.

As for the pornographers themselves, to Julius, watching their comings and goings, it appeared that the tensions and constraints which had seemed to come into existence at the time of the death of Webber had been evaporated—perhaps burnt out. Sammy himself had commented on it, referring to a new impetus governing their joint activities since the cremation. It may also have been a reflection of the change in Julius's own attitude that, passing through the shop, they would all now often stop and talk with him.

He noticed the greatest alteration in Louise. She seemed not only as untroubled as before the day of the cremation, but altogether freer than he had known her at any time; physically, too—as if she had come to terms with the sun, made it her natural element—she appeared uberosus and resplendent.

'Julius, it's time you were married.'

She teased him about his chastity. It became something of a sport: on each of their encounters she would tell him about some imaginary and preposterous woman, who, she asserted, would eliminate Julius's misogyny. She, Louise, would of course arrange a rendezvous.

With Bertie, too, he became on more familiar terms. Bertie told him once about a motor-car he had been trying out and, Julius expressing polite interest, Bertie subsequently had regaled him with detailed and expert accounts of his search for the car of his dream.

There was more reserve in his dealings with Veronica and Bateman, but that was less on the part of Julius than on theirs, for the intimacy of their relationship tended to exclude other people.

However, there was one occasion when the four of them—Louise, Bertie, Veronica and Bateman—were on the point of leaving together. Julius was in the shop.

'Come along, Julius. We're all going for a drink.' It was—perhaps surprisingly—Veronica.

Louise took it up. 'The barmaid's just your type. She's got the sort of moustache you're crazy about.'

'Alcohol calls,' said Bertie. 'Fall in, Julius.'

'I'll have to see if Sammy needs me.'

He had no reason not to accompany them—to himself he put it no higher than that. Also, he was thirsty.

They sat at a table outside—the same courtyard in which Bertie and Louise had drunk together on a previous occasion. It was Bertie who suggested that they should drink wine. He ordered two bottles to start with, and later more.

Quite quickly, as if a spell had been put upon them, the raw wine, the heat, the mood of the hour conspiring, they were all in a state of rare intoxication. After a little while they had the courtyard to themselves and could talk and behave quite freely, sprawled and tousled, chairs propped back on their rear legs, gestures expansive, laughter uproarious.

Julius also surrendered. As his contribution to the general gaiety, he told them about his visit to the dentist, exaggerating the sinister and seedy aspect of it and his own perturbation. The story was a tremendous success, reducing them all to practically speechless hilarity; its echoes continued to rebound for some time, an ingredient of their catch-phrases and vinous banter.

It also set the pattern for succeeding stories—tales of jovial disaster. Bertie recounted some motoring exploits, ending in engine failures in the most awkward circumstances or brushes with police patrols. Bateman described an occasion when, a young uniformed policeman, he had had the seat of his trousers torn out by a playful Alsatian. This led Louise on to an account of how she had shocked two of her husband's pupils by inadvertently appearing before them in her underclothes. Such alcoholic indiscretions may sometimes serve the same purpose as more formalized confessions to a priest or analyst.

Sprawled, dishevelled, red-mouthed and flushed! Bertie poured more wine into such glasses as had room for it.

'When I was in hospital,' Veronica began, speaking jerkily and quickly, 'when I was in hospital—I suppose I was eighteen, nineteen—I had a great passion for one of the doctors. Actually, he was a consultant, a very impor-

tant man, you just couldn't imagine. And he had a beard, a huge, black beard, which I used . . .'

They were not all listening yet: Bertie was still laughing and mocking Louise.

'I was in hospital four years, you know, my leg, my tubercular leg . . .'

The nervous intensity of her recital was not to be attributed to the wine she had drunk. Julius was still sufficiently attentive to be amused by the close and loving regard with which Bateman followed her.

'Well, after the operation he kept telling me I could walk by myself, but I couldn't. He said I was acting. I don't know if he really believed it, or whether it's just something they say to dare you. Well, this time my leg was getting better and I thought I'd show him. He'd be so proud of me. So when he came in the ward I was sitting on the edge of the bed all ready. I got up and hobbled down the ward—my leg was giving me hell—and he hadn't seen me yet. He was standing at the first bed, surrounded by . . .'

Louise and Bertie were now paying casual attention.

'Just as I got up to them my leg gave and I went swoosh. And as I went down my hand hit a pail of slops or something a nurse was holding . . . and all over his beard.'

Veronica laughed shrilly. 'I thought I should never get over it. I didn't walk again for weeks and weeks. I wanted to die.'

She said it laughing—flushed, open-mouthed, laughing—but Julius knew that in fact she was speaking the literal truth.

'He never spoke to me again. He thought I'd done it on purpose. Whenever he came into the ward he wouldn't look at me. I wanted to die.'

'I remember,' Bertie began, clipping her last words. 'I remember when . . .'

So, under the liberating influence of the wine and the candid sunlight, the succession of significant or merely entertaining anecdotes continued. Which of them was it who first introduced the name of the bookseller?

'You should have shut up the shop and brought him along,' said Bertie.

It was as if the bookseller were suddenly among them, his gravity sobering them and bringing an extra dimension of consequence to their words and movements. They ceased to sprawl, ceased to shout, leant forward over the stained table like plotters.

'Have you ever been drinking with Sammy, Julius?'

'Not seriously.'

'Have you ever seen him drunk?'

'It's not in character.'

'He wouldn't ever want to lose control of himself, would he?' That was Veronica's contribution. 'You couldn't imagine him . . .'

'Think of old Sammy,' Bertie interrupted, 'weaving down the street, arms round a couple of tarts, singing . . .'

It was a shocking, a blasphemous conception.

'No, he wouldn't want to lose control,' Bateman said. 'And he likes to see things as they are, without illusions.'

'Master of his fate,' said Bertie solemnly.

Julius made no contribution to these sententious observations: they seemed to him utterly irrelevant, meaningless. While they all agreed about certain obvious characteristics of the bookseller, they all appeared, too, to see something different in him, as if he, mirror-like, offered them reflections of their own souls.

Yes, Julius pondered, there was a sense in which Sammy was insubstantial, lacking in—it seemed an outrageous thing to consider!—lacking in definition, for, incorporating the images of others, his own became blurred and diffuse.

And yet his spirit survived the trite and inadequate commentaries of his disciples, as a great triumph or disaster will survive the glib vulgarities of the newspaper headlines, and even derive greater stature from them. He was there among them, tangible, hypostatic; they themselves, heads grouped over the ringed and spattered table, were after all less substantial.

Julius, a little drunk, suddenly roared with laughter: he realized that in his thoughts he had used the word 'disciples'.

He tried it out aloud, softly. 'Disciples!' Then, 'The pornographer's disciples!'

No one seemed to hear him. Veronica and Bertie were talking at the same time, Bertie gesticulating wildly, so that the red liquid slopped around the waving glass. Bateman seemed lost in an introspective study. Louise was mopping a spot from her dress.

At that instant, for perhaps the first time in his life, Julius felt a sense of fraternity; and that too was something which was eminently laughable.

'Why should he . . .' Julius cut into the confused talk, and there was that in his manner which silenced the others. 'Why should he . . . choose us?'

He laughed again. 'That's all I want to say to you.'

After that, Julius paid very little attention. The moment of fraternity passed. Although he was not accustomed to drinking, his sobriety returned to him and he felt detached. Only the gritty heat oppressed him and the light stung his eyes.

He wanted to go. Yet it seemed too much effort to break up the party. But then this was done for him, and in circumstances which aroused his curiosity.

Bateman had left the table and had gone inside—to visit the lavatory or to buy another bottle, Julius did not know which. However, he came out quickly, empty-handed, his eyes screwed against the sun, his walk suddenly wary and purposeful. He sat next to Veronica and said something quietly to her, which altered her whole demeanour (all this happening within a few feet of Julius, but he was watching it as if from a long way away, or through the wrong end of a telescope), causing her to throw a startled look first at Bateman and then at the door from which he had just emerged. Neither Louise nor Bertie appeared to notice anything.

Bateman stood up again. 'I'm sorry we've got to break it up. I hadn't realized the time.'

Veronica rose beside him, leaving her glass half-full.

'We must go. We must go.'

They had gone before Julius could ask Bateman who or what it was that he had seen inside. Perhaps he would

not have asked him in any event. His sense of fraternity had been fleeting, now likewise his curiosity. He did not really care.

The party was over. For Julius it remained only an incident—not to be repeated.

What should be made quite clear is that any modification of his austerity and his isolation were superficial only—chips and scratches on the surface of his monolithic integrity, the inviolable stone of his heart.

Throughout the following days of sunshine, the nights of single sheets, he remained cold at the core, uncontaminated by the summer madness. He was still waiting.



## Chapter 5

'**S**EEING you're a friend,' the dealer repeated, in his thick Scots voice, 'if you pay the balance off in twelve months I'll no charge you any interest.'

They shook hands, concluding the formalities in the dealer's narrow and grimy office—improbable setting for the consummation of a dream!

Bertie backed the motor-car carefully out of the yard. It was his now—as he had known it would be when he had first set eyes on it, the dealer pointing when they were still thirty yards away, and he had felt that flash of instantaneous recognition, almost of self-identification with it, like the first glimpse of a woman who was to be his only true love, his destiny. The technical examination and the trial run had been merely the necessary conventional preliminaries of courtship.

He drove slowly, very carefully along the straight but busy road which would take him on to the by-pass, where he could test the car's speed. Instinctively in this sphere Bertie's taste was impeccable: the car had character and individuality without flashiness or eccentricity; its performance combined strength with reliability, delicacy of control with the surging and tumescent thrust of its power.

Even when he reached the double carriageway Bertie drove, although fast, with great care and precision. Except once: more or less deliberately, he went into a left-hand bend at an excessive speed, so that he had to fight to hold it and a car of lesser quality might well have left the road. After this he took things easily, driving back slowly, relaxed and confident.

There were some lock-up garages not far from where he lived, and he drove there first, making arrangements to rent one. Then he went home, leaving the car parked in the shabby street outside.

'Come and look.'

It was with a certain modesty, almost a shyness, that he showed the car to his landlady.

'We are going up in the world, aren't we? Passes everything except the petrol pump, I bet.'

All the same, he could see that she was deeply and satisfyingly impressed.

'I'll take you for a run this evening if you like.'

They went in, chattering, Bertie turning for a last glimpse. He was going up to his room to study some of the technical literature he had brought away from the car dealer's with him.

'There's some letters for you. I forgot,' his landlady called out as he was mounting the stairs.

'Where did I put the blessed things? Can't remember a thing these . . .' her voice ran on. 'Oh, here they are. On the dresser.'

She handed them to him: an uninteresting printed envelope and a plain white card addressed in a mauve ink. The handwriting—very feminine, he took in instinctively—was unfamiliar. He turned the card over.

It said simply: *I must see you. Ring me;* and was signed: *Joan*. A telephone number was added.

He was acquainted with more than one girl whose name was Joan. He thought for a moment; then, before he began to dial the number, he knew who had sent the card.

Her scent, expensive probably but too generously applied, filled the car despite the open sun-roof, adding to the effect of opulence and luxury.

She was sitting in the passenger seat, turned towards him, her back half against the door, her handbag on the seat between them. She was wearing a short-sleeved dress, close-fitting and abbreviated, so that her nylon-ed knees, as round as apples, gleamed on the edge of his field of vision. Her position was such that to anyone on the pavement only her head, halo-ed by its dusty blonde hair, would be visible. She was smoking the cigarette he had lit for her with elaborate elegance.

Bertie, on the other hand, drove with his between his lips, screwing his eyes against the smoke. Again in contrast with her, he wore a sober, dark grey suit, with a white

shirt, which emphasized his sun-tan. They might have made a picture for an advertisement—driving along the sea-front to an expensive hotel or casino.

It was not yet really dark, although the street-lamps were lit: again, a bruised, purple evening.

‘I suppose you know where we’re going.’

Previously neither of them had spoken for several minutes. Her tone suggested that she was not quite so antagonistic as her words implied, conditioned as she was to the war of the sexes.

‘I said: I suppose you know where you’re taking me.’

Bertie stubbed out his cigarette carefully in the tray beneath the dashboard. He had already noticed with irritation her carelessness with the ash.

‘A little run. It’s a nice evening.’ His manner was blasé, masterful. ‘I know a club out at ——.’ He named a town on the river some thirty miles outside the city.

‘Listen, sweetie,’ the girl, Joan, said, ‘you don’t think I’m going to make a night of it, do you? I didn’t come out for a cross-country rally.’

They were already on the trunk road. Bertie eased his way outside a heavy lorry, and the car shot smoothly forward, as if its propelling power came from the gentle pressure he felt between his shoulder-blades.

‘I only got her today.’ His voice was casual. ‘What do you think of her?’

‘It’s not a new one, is it?’ She did not pursue the subject of their destination.

‘I had a friend once who changed his every time the ash-trays were full up. Or that’s what he said, anyway. He was a jeweller.’ She pulled her dress minimally over her knees. ‘Would you mind shutting the roof?’

Bertie reached up with one hand. With the deepening darkness, the air was cooler.

‘Give me another cigarette.’

She blew out the smoke. ‘It doesn’t seem to matter what I say, does it? How do you know I haven’t got a date?’ She did not, however, sound particularly aggrieved. ‘How do you know I haven’t got a date with Clinton?’

‘You’re still seeing him?’ Bertie said indifferently.

The girl laughed—a rather brittle laugh—but did not reply.

They were now out of the built-up area, and the yellow-lit road continued straight into the night, like an airport runway, slicing the banks of darkness.

'I came out here once with ———,' the girl said. The name was that of a famous racing motorist. 'We were doing over a hundred. I think he was half-drunk too.'

Bertie deliberately eased his foot off the pedal.

Again the girl laughed, rather more warmly this time. 'I'm glad you're not the sort of man who likes being dared. Most men are like schoolboys.'

She changed her position, sitting flat back against the seat and taking her bag on to her lap, so that she was nearer to him, not touching him, but in a way seeming now to range them together.

'Don't you want to know why I wanted to see you?'

It was Bertie's turn to laugh—to snort, rather. 'There's an obvious reason.'

'You fancy yourself, don't you? If you only knew. You were almost too drunk that night to . . . Another cigarette, please.'

'Keep the packet, you'd better.'

She lit two cigarettes with a lighter from her hand-bag and put one in his mouth. He could taste her lipstick.

At a roundabout they left the main road for one that was unlit and tree-lined. Bertie switched on his head-lamps and the drowning cat's-eyes swam towards them.

'It was an impulse sending that card,' the girl said. 'But you're never in, are you? I did try to phone you two or three times.'

'You didn't leave your name.'

'No,' the girl said. 'That was more than a month ago, and then it didn't matter because they put it off.'

'Who put what off?'

'They couldn't find out what they wanted, and then something different turned up anyway.'

She drew on her cigarette. A moth flattened itself against the windscreen.

'Clinton's going to write a piece about you.'

The girl flashed a quick look at Bertie out of the corner of her eye.

The club was an adapted country house, built in the early nineteenth century: a dance-floor, bars and a restaurant took up most of the ground-floor; on the second floor there were a number of smaller rooms, dimly lit and more intimate; above were the staff quarters and bedrooms.

'Are you going to get drunk again tonight?' the girl said, as they entered.

Bertie merely shook his head.

They went up to the second floor. After their drinks had been served they took up their conversation where they had dropped it on parking the car.

'First he sent Ronnie round there to see what he could dig out. That was—oh!—weeks ago.'

'Who's Ronnie?'

'He didn't get anywhere. He's one of Clin's pimply bright young men. Then—I told you—something else came along, so he let it slide for a bit. But Clin's a sticker, sweetie—in more ways than one. He went along himself not so long ago, and he was mad because some youth sent him away with a flea in his ear.'

'Then he hasn't found out anything?' Bertie said, but without hope.

'You've forgotten something,' the girl said. She was looking down, turning her glass between her hands. 'You've forgotten what you said that night. Give me a cigarette, please.'

Bertie felt in his pockets. 'You've got them.'

'I must have left them in the car. Please get some, sweetie.'

When he came back from the bar he said: 'What I told him, or what I told you . . . afterwards?'

'Both,' the girl said, through the smoke. 'What he wants really is to get hold of one of your specials.' She regarded him with a certain speculation. 'You really do that, do you?'

Bertie said nothing.

'He says the books are two a penny. It's the others he's really interested in. Could you get one of them? He thought you might have prints of them.'

Bertie looked at her steadily.

'He told me to try and get one from you.'

'You bitch,' Bertie said quietly. 'You dirty little whore!'

'I'm not a proper whore,' the girl said lightly. 'I only take cheques. Suppose I said I'd sleep with you tonight if you . . .'

'You can . . .' He stuttered over the obscenity, and before he could complete the phrase she had dumb-founded him by her laughter. It was entirely different from any way in which she had laughed before, seeming full of a genuine, if bitter, amusement.

'I'm surprised you're so pure, sweetie,' she said, when she had ceased laughing. She put her long-fingered hand on his fist, clenched on the table. 'I told him to go to hell.'

'What!' exclaimed Bertie, too slow-witted to follow.

'He could go and jump at himself, I told him.' She smiled. 'So I'm not here on his behalf. I came to tell you, that's why I sent the card, kept ringing you, to warn you . . . The dirty little whore—that's what you said, isn't it?—just wanted to warn you.'

'Get me another drink, please, sweetie. Don't you know how to look after a girl, how to keep her soft and sweet?'

They said nothing more until the waitress had brought the drinks. The band below suddenly started to play more loudly and the plangent jazz vibrated around them.

'He's got the names, I know—the names of you who go to the bookshop. And they took a picture of the shop. They'll print that.'

'I'm sorry,' Bertie said at last. 'I apologize.'

'They've been snooping around. He's really mad with you all because it's taken him so long to get what he wants. Clin likes to have his own way, I should know.'

'What will he do now,' Bertie said, 'if he doesn't get what he wants?'

The girl took his hand again. 'I think he's got one

now. That's why I wrote to you. I'm not sure if he's got it yet or if he's just on the track of it. He's found someone who's bought one, and he's putting the bite on him. He won't wait long now.' She moved her fingers against his pulse somewhat mechanically. 'You'd better get out quick.'

'What will he do now?' Bertie said again.

'I expect when he's all ready he'll go and tell your boss he's going to write a piece, and see what he has to say. That's what he usually does.'

He had not yet taken it all in; it had come too suddenly; the taste of disaster, like that of pleasure, must be savoured slowly to extract its full essence. He felt as if he had been punched in the stomach.

'Come on, we'd better go.'

'Nothing's going to happen tonight,' the girl said. 'Clin won't do anything tonight.'

She took her glass in both hands and held it up to her mouth, not drinking, but speaking over its rim. She lowered her shadowed eye-lids.

'If they know you, sweetie, they'll let you have a room here.'

'No,' said Bertie. 'Not here.'

He did not know what he meant then. She emptied her glass and they left. They got into the car. Bertie drove out of the cinder car-park, back in the direction from which they had come. After a few minutes—driving slowly—they came to a narrow side-turning, between ragged grass verges and high hedges. Bertie had to brake and reverse before turning along it.

'Well then!' the girl said.

He knew now what he had meant. It had to be in the motor-car. He drove two or three hundred yards along the lane and then stopped, switching off the lights. For a moment he sat without saying anything. The lights off, it could be seen that although there was only a new moon—a thin sliver—it was a clear night, the purple sky star-pricked.

'Do you want a cigarette?'

'No, thank you,' the girl said sedately.

He turned upon her.

'Wouldn't it be better in the back?' she said.

'A cigarette, darling.' Her voice was softer.

'You smoke too much,' Bertie said.

He had undressed her entirely. Now she was fastening her stocking. He got out of the car. The air was fresh and sweet-smelling, but it was darker now, the thin moon temporarily obscured by cloud, and he had to strain his eyes to read his watch: it was nearly four o'clock. The girl got out and stood beside him, her cigarette glowing. She tucked her arm under his but remained silent.

'We'd better be getting back,' he said after a moment, without analysing his reluctance.

They got into the car again. His headlamps, suddenly revealing the hedges, the tangled grass, reduced the dimensions of the world.

'I can't turn here. I'll have to back.'

On the main road again, he drove slowly, holding the wheel loosely. He had given the girl his jacket to wear.

'If all the time I felt like I do now,' she said reflectively, breaking their silence, 'I could be quite a nice girl.'

'How long have we got?' said Bertie.

There was no other traffic; they had the world to themselves.

'What?'

'Before Bassett . . .'

'Not long,' the girl said. 'A day or two. Perhaps a week. It depends.'

'Give me a cigarette, will you?' Bertie said.

She lit it for him.

'Aren't you having one?'

'I smoke too much,' she said.

Bertie took one hand from the wheel, clenched his fist and began to swear softly and furiously.

When he had finished, the girl said: 'It'll be getting light soon.' She paused. 'We'll be back in an hour.'

She was very low in the seat. She had turned up the collar of the jacket and her face was almost hidden.



'I suppose we do have to go back.'

'What?' said Bertie.

'Have you got any money?' the girl said. 'I think I've got nearly twenty pounds.'

Bertie, who had been driving very casually, suddenly peered intently at the road.

The girl jerked upwards in the seat, the jacket falling away from her face.

'If we just turned round, turned round now and went on driving and we stopped somewhere, just when we felt like it. Anywhere.' She broke off abruptly.

'We'd have to go back some time.' His voice was ponderous.

'I suppose so.'

He braked gently; turned, reversed, turned again. The lighter patch of sky, which had been on their left-hand, was now on their right, slightly in front of them, so that they were driving into the dawn.

'What about the others . . . Sammy? I must tell them, warn them. What about you, anyway, and Bassett?'

'Telephone,' the girl said. 'You can telephone. Don't worry about me.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

He squeezed his foot more firmly on the accelerator and the car surged forwards, transmitting the pressure between their shoulders.

## Chapter 6

WHEN they had finished lunch and she had cleared and washed the dishes Louise had nothing left to do. She seemed lately to have been spending less time on 'house-keeping; nothing in their neat, bright home revealed it, so it might be supposed that much of her previous effort had been redundant, the effect of an interior compulsion or a gesture of propitiation.

'You remember the boys are coming this afternoon?' Her husband was referring to two of the pupils to whom he was giving private tuition.

'I thought we might go out in the garden. I can put the deck-chairs out. What are you going to do?'

'Oh, I don't know.'

'You aren't bored, are you?' he asked gently. 'Perhaps we should have tried to get away this summer after all.'

'I'm not bored, my dear,' she said. 'I'm perfectly happy, I'm very happy. Perhaps I'll go down to the shops.'

'You are really happy, aren't you?' It was strange that he, so reticent a man, should persist. 'You have no regrets?'

'Of course I've no regrets.' Her answer was absolutely frank.

They were in their bedroom. Louise, who had just changed, was sitting on the stool before her dressing-table, making up her face. She could see him in the glass: he was pacing slowly backwards and forwards, as he must do, she thought, in front of his class.

'A little while ago it seemed to me that you were'—he selected his words carefully—'unsettled, perhaps a little discontented.'

It was completely typical that he should wait until now, weeks after, to refer to it.

'Perhaps I was a bit run down,' she said.

'Yes.' He seemed to seize on this—she was still watching his reflection—with relief. 'I think you were. Before your mother came and while she was still here. I don't imply cause and effect.' He said that jokingly. 'But at any rate since then you've been very much more your old self.'

There was something else he wanted to say; she tried to help him.

'I don't seem to worry so much. For some reason I was letting little things get on my nerves.'

He was still pacing, head down, shooting a glance at her back from time to time.

'Louise.' At that moment his reflection had passed out of her vision. 'We are getting on top financially now, one way and another—very largely thanks to your efforts.'

'Yes,' she said.

He itemized the hire purchase commitments they had paid off.

'And now with this coaching I'm doing and the extra responsibility pay I shall be getting next term . . .' He had come to a halt just behind her. 'You remember what we said?'

She knew what was coming; only the timing took her by surprise.

'This modelling job of yours was only going to be temporary, to tide us over. You were going to give it up when we had got our financial affairs straightened out.'

'Yes,' she said.

He cleared his throat. 'We were going to wait, we were going to wait to have a baby until . . .'

'Yes,' she said quickly. 'Yes, I know.'

'Well, I thought . . .'

She swung round on the stool, but he was not looking at her.

'Yes, I think so, darling,' she said, trying to keep her voice as controlled as his. 'I think very soon.'

There was a look of deliverance on his face, rather than pleasure or happiness; but she knew him well and was not deceived. He looked at his watch and appeared to be surprised by what he saw.

'The boys will be here soon,' he said, turning away. 'I'd better get things ready.'

The boys had arrived. For a little while she watched from the kitchen window: the three deck-chairs planted

in the middle of the square, trim lawn—kept green during the weeks of drought by her husband's assiduous hosing—; the pile of battered text-books on the grass; the boys, low in their chairs, almost hidden from her; the man in the open-necked tennis shirt leaning forward, moving his hands. During the next hour he would be uttering more words than in the whole of the rest of the day.

She would make them some lemonade soon; she put a jug of water in the refrigerator in readiness. Perhaps after that she would go out; she could not quite make up her mind.

In the sitting-room she switched on the radio, but some sporting commentary was in progress so she turned it off again without trying to find another station. She lit one of her very occasional cigarettes. It was cooler here in the front of the house, which faced north.

Thinking about having a baby. Perhaps not so much thinking as feeling, imagining, day-dreaming. Leaning back on the cushions, she looked down at herself, to where the child would be engendered and carried.

Will my figure come back? They say it's never the same after. Then I shan't . . . but, of course, I shall have given all that up anyway.

Curiously enough, in her day-dreams Louise saw, not a helpless, squalling baby, but a boy of perhaps three or four, a parting in his hair, spruce in a brightly coloured shirt and shorts that stopped well above his knees; white socks to just below his knees, dazzling against the brown of his skin.

So much for all the paint and the furniture then, I suppose. Well, that's what it's for, isn't it? We'll have to put up with it. We can't be on at him all day to be careful.

That was Louise's habitual manner of reflection: in images and dialogues rather than concepts. She was a woman upon whom the symbol exerted a powerful influence; possibly that was the key to much in her character, the source of her strength and weakness, but especially her strength, her instinctive realism.

Margaret Saunders had died childless.

The child running barefoot on the powdered sand, the

sea a turquoise blue, as smooth as a pond, without any menace at all. Nothing shall ever harm him.

It was time she made the lemonade.

She got up and discarded her cigarette. Simultaneously she heard the squeak of the front gate. Stepping towards the window, she caught only a glimpse of the man coming up the path—sufficient, however, to suggest that he was a stranger to her. The doorbell rang.

No, she had never seen him before. He was shorter than she was, even taking into account that he was standing a little below her level.

‘Good afternoon. Mrs Crampton?’

He was quite young, with indeterminate, immature features, his face dominated by a heavy pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

‘Yes.’

She noticed the motor-car parked outside the gate.

‘My name’s Hobbs. Ronald Hobbs. I’m from the *Daily* —.’ He named the newspaper of Louise’s horoscopes, of the articles of Clinton Bassett. ‘I wonder if I could have a word with you.’

She led him inside. He sat down without being invited. He was carrying a thick and shining briefcase, which he rested on his knees like a tray.

Her emotion was limited to curiosity. ‘Was it me or my husband who you . . .’

‘You, please, Mrs Crampton.’ His voice was nasal, almost transatlantic. He spoke without looking at her.

‘Nice house, very nice. Had a job finding it. All these suburban streets look the same.’ He was unfastening the straps of the briefcase. ‘Won’t you sit down? This might take a little time.’

If Louise began to feel apprehensive at this stage it was not because of the identity of her visitor—or even because of his manners—; it derived from his personality: although she could not have defined it, she felt the fake confidence overlaying his insecurity like a sinister disguise.

‘Is your husband home?’

Louise nodded.

'We shan't be disturbed though? I might want to see him later.'

She felt too, although this also she could not have defined, a purely instinctive feminine contempt for him, as if she knew him to be deficient in virility.

'What did you say your name was?'

'Ronald Hobbs. I work for the Clinton Bassett column.' He had unfastened his briefcase and was taking out a notebook. 'How's business at the bookshop, Mrs Crampton?'

He did look at her then, but only very briefly, his eyes screwed, his face twisted into lines of false tenacity.

'All right, all right,' he went on, as if Louise had interrupted him. 'We know all about it. I saw one of your performances myself only yesterday. I thought you were very good, dear. Seen better, but you were very good.'

She had not heard a word of that. The shock which had drawn all the blood from her head and chilled her internally had not in the first place proceeded from any reasoning fear, but from the mere intrusion of the studio and its activities here, into her home. Without knowing she had done it, she looked round at the door, which the young man had shut behind him on entering.

'All right, all right. There's no need to panic. We can help you. You co-operate with us and there needn't be any trouble—for you.'

Louise still said nothing, a hand to her throat.

'All we want's a story. I'm just doing my job. No moral principles involved. I'm authorized to make you an offer.'

She stared at him blankly, unable to identify him as the agent of her disaster, the author of the destruction which enveloped her, bringing everything she had lived and worked for tumbling into fragments.

'An offer,' she repeated.

'It's Samson we're really after. I'll put it to you this way: you give me the whole story, how you started, what goes on there, the whole works . . .' The notebook was now open and he held a pencil in his hand. 'And we'll keep your name out of it. It's a good offer. You're lucky really. What do you say?'

‘What?’

Again she had scarcely heard him, but this time it was because half-consciously she was listening to familiar sounds at the back of the house. Then her husband was calling her.

She muttered, ‘Excuse me.’

She found him in the kitchen, ineffectually manœuvring with jug and glasses. He did not look up as she came in.

‘I thought we’d have the drink now. I can’t find the sugar.’

He had not heard the journalist’s entry. Quickly and precisely, economic in her movements, she prepared the lemonade. He took the tray from her.

‘Thank you. Are you going down to the shops?’

‘Yes,’ Louise said. ‘Yes, I am.’

She had made up her mind.

‘Listen to me,’ she said urgently. ‘Listen. I can’t talk to you here. Is that your car outside?’

‘All right,’ he said, ‘if that’s how you want it. You mean’—he sounded astonished—‘your husband doesn’t know about it?’

She had the curious impression that although he was fully aware of the odiousness of what he was doing he would have liked her to like him; beneath the veneer of his unfeeling cynicism—as if he were speaking in someone else’s accents—there was something timid and ingratiating. She distrusted him profoundly, but she had no choice.

The car was parked on the road that ran above the railway cutting; on the other side was a sparse wood, from which they could hear the shouts of children, although they were invisible. His notebook was still open on his knee but he had stopped writing a little time before.

‘What guarantee have I got?’ Louise said.

‘Guarantee?’

‘Now I’ve told you everything, that you won’t print my name.’

'I gave you my word,' he said. 'You'll have to trust me.'

Perhaps he could sense her distrust, her profound contempt.

'We always play fair with our informants. A confidence is a confidence. Put it this way if you like, would anyone ever tell us anything if they couldn't rely on our discretion?' There was a hint of desperation in his voice. 'We've got our code, you know.'

Louise said nothing, looking away, letting her eyes sightlessly follow the train approaching below.

'It's just the story we're after. You don't think I care a damn if . . .'

'You've got your story,' Louise said.

It was not for her own sake; she told herself that; told herself (and believed) that the choice had been only between two betrayals: no choice at all, in fact, to weigh the bookseller and her confederates against her home, her husband, the un-engendered child.

'There's just one other thing.' He was speaking again in his 'tough' voice. 'Don't give the game away. Our agreement's off if you give the game away.'

They were the loyalties, the symbols by which she lived.

'What did you say?'

'No tip-off. That's important. Don't tell Samson that we're on to him. We don't want the birds to fly.'

'He won't run away,' Louise said.

Despite what had happened, it seemed absurd to be threatened, intimidated by this weakly young man at her side. It was even more absurd to imagine that he could possibly pose a threat to the bookseller. But then—and, astonishingly, for the first time—Louise realized that he was only a harbinger of disaster.

She tried to control her voice. 'What about the police?' she said. 'If you put it all in your paper.'

Even her betrayal might have been in vain.

'They won't get your name from us. If they do, it'll be your pornographic friends who'll have told . . .'

Then everything would be over. A vivid, nightmare image formed itself within her head.

'But usually in these sort of cases, it's only the distributor



they're really interested in. Of course, you can't be sure, you'll have to take your chance.'

A body, lapped by the sea, sand in its eyes and mouth!

'I've got to go back,' Louise said.

'I'll run you.'

'No,' she said sharply. 'I'll walk.'

'Come on. Don't be silly.'

'I'll walk.'

The surface of the road seemed viscous and insubstantial. He had turned the car round and drove slowly past her but she would not look up. The voices of the children playing were suddenly louder; she caught a flash of a white shirt between the trees, like a wing. This occupied only the foreground of her vision: more clearly in focus she could see the three chairs grouped on the trim green lawn; beyond that, in a kind of mirage-haze, a yellow beach with something dark and pitifully small lying there. A child, a boy of three or four in a bright shirt, ran over the sand . . .

'Can you tell me the time, please?'

The child was in front of her, in the road, looking up at her with curiosity; he must in fact have been seven or eight years old. His shirt and shorts were quite black down the front—doubtless, from climbing trees.

She looked at her watch and told him, and he ran back into the wood. Louise began to walk quickly, with the impetus of purpose.

There was a man in the telephone kiosk. Waiting, in a position where he could see her, Louise tapped her foot impatiently. When he came out he smiled and said something to her but she did not hear what it was. The earpiece of the telephone was still warm.

It was the bookseller himself who answered. She had not rehearsed what she was going to say.

'I shan't be able to come next time. I'm sorry.'

He was expressing his regret, but telling her that it was of no consequence, and that he would get in touch with her in the usual way before the following session.

'I shan't be coming any more.'

There was just a slight pause. When he went on his voice was still pleasant and unconcerned.

'I see. I am very sorry, Louise, but of course I shall not try to persuade you otherwise. It is none of my business, I admit, but why have you come to this rather sudden decision at this particular time?'

She had rehearsed nothing, had prepared no explanation. Her instinct was to slam down the receiver. Unless she ended it now, she would break down and confess.

'I'm having a baby,' she said, the words coming from an unknown source.

## Chapter 7

JULIUS's toothache had returned, but as yet the pain was easily tolerable, little more than an irritation which drew his tongue irresistibly to the smooth, hard swelling which had developed close to the site of the extraction. It was perhaps because of his toothache that he could not settle himself as usual. He had gone to his balcony-eyrie as darkness was falling, but his contemplation of the rooftops and the silhouetted chimneys failed to afford its usual satisfaction; similarly, the ant-like, foreshortened activities in the patchily lit street below. He was bored, even restless.

It was another warm, close night. At even the height of the balcony, with a little wind blowing cool from the river, his skin still felt damp and greasy. The heat wave had lasted too long: the city smelt over-cooked and stale.

He abandoned his vantage-point, and, pausing only to pick up a jacket which he draped loosely over his shoulders, went down the several flights of narrow, twisting stairs, scorning the lights. He slipped out into the street almost stealthily, like a prowling cat.

There were still a good many people about. It was a street which later would become something of a centre for the nightwalkers, but at present its indigenous denizens were outnumbered by casual strollers, visitors from a daytime world.

The bar on the corner was still open, and outside the neighbouring café a group of men in pressed, dark suits exchanged unlaughing badinage in a Mediterranean tongue. On the other pavement stood some women, stilt-heeled, turning their heads whenever an unaccompanied man passed.

In this ambience Julius had the true nightwalker's inconspicuousness, almost a kind of invisibility, so that two minutes after he had passed along the street no one who did not actually know him would ever recall his presence.

His head was empty of intentions; he was simply submerging himself in the night streets as another man might

in a familiar book or another in a vice which has become deadeningly habitual. He crossed the road and turned into another similar street. From the entrance to a basement club came the distilled strains of a jazz lament, and four coloured men tumbled out of a long yellow car. A restaurant here boasted the distinction of a doorman, but his stunted frame and ill-fitting uniform turned him into a parody of the guardians of more luxurious establishments.

An old woman, her feet bound in rags and carrying three or four baskets strung together, poked at the dustbins at the end of an alley. A ravaged alcoholic, talking to himself, limped by, pressed close against the wall. Julius passed unregarding, blank-faced—like those houses, shuttered against the tongues of the burning sun, awaiting a visitation to irradiate their stagnant and tenebrous interiors.

He had not noticed the girl at all. When he was a few steps past her, she called after him and he looked back. She was standing in the dark doorway of a shop.

‘Just a minute.’

They were the words with which she might have attracted the attention of a potential client, but he was not misled.

‘You work at that bookshop, don’t you?’

Her scent was as familiar an ingredient of the night as the jazz from the club doorway, the footsteps of the two policemen—now passing under the lamp at the end of the street. The girl walked for a few paces alongside Julius.

‘You want to watch it, you and your boss. Someone’s been snooping round asking questions.’

‘The coppers?’

‘Nah!’ She swore. She was younger than most of the women around here, but her voice was hard and raucous . . . ageless.

‘None of the boys neither, never seen him before. Proper little rat he was.’

The policemen had passed out of sight. The girl cast an anxious glance towards the other side of the road, where the shadows might have concealed another and un-uniformed observer.

'You want to watch it. He knows your business.' She was obviously reluctant to say any more or to stay any longer by his side.

'O.K.,' said Julius. 'Thanks.'

'Think nothing of it.' She turned away, her handbag swinging against her leg.

The bookshop was nearby: he might have gone that way in any event, even without the encounter with the girl. An impulse? Scarcely that—almost a need, as if all the time his restlessness had been leading him to Sammy without his knowing it, and the girl's warning assumed retrospectively the quality of inevitability.

He had the key in his pocket. The shop was in complete darkness, and there was no knowing that Sammy would be there, but Julius was aware that the bookseller frequently remained in his office—in preference to wherever it was that he lived, in whatever surroundings and with whatever company; for these were circumstances which he had never disclosed.

Julius went through the shop without putting on the light. The studio was also in darkness, but when he pushed open the door of the bookseller's inner sanctum there was Sammy seated at his desk, the books and papers in front of him phosphorescent beneath the intricately jointed table lamp, the statuette of the owl casting an elongated shadow.

'Why, Julius.'

Nothing about him suggested a man surprised in a moment of relaxation; despite the heat, he wore collar and tie, jacket; his hair was trimly brushed. He evinced no curiosity about Julius's unexpected entry.

'I wanted to talk to you.' Having said that, Julius was at a loss. He lurched about the room almost coltishly, his jacket sliding from his shoulders.

'There's something I've got to tell you.' But it was not the street-girl's warning which occupied his mind. He did not know why he was there. He threw his jacket over a chair.

'Why do you suppose people no longer talk about serious matters seriously?' Sammy might have been taking

up a conversation halted a moment before, or his small gesture with his hand above the books and papers could have been intended to indicate that his thoughts had developed from something he had just read.

'Or if they do, it lasts only for a matter of moments. They cannot endure it any longer. They collapse then into mirth or irony or the indulgence of their own obsessions or fantasies.' His manner was professorial. 'I suppose it might be because serious talk has been so befouled by our teachers and our leaders that everyone has fallen into the habit of derision. The voices of truth have almost been exterminated—like an animal species which stands in the way of progress—obliterated by the conscious lies and the lies of self-delusion. How feeble—I sometimes think, at moments of discouragement—one's own voice is, almost drowned by the torrent of lies!'

Julius, finally, had thrown himself down into a chair.

'I wasn't coming here tonight,' he said. 'I was just out for a walk. I didn't know if you'd be here. Then when this tart stopped me I thought I ought to let you know as soon as possible.'

He told the bookseller what the woman had said to him. He now believed that this was the sole cause of his call.

'It sounds as if it might have been the same young man as you encountered some time ago,' said Sammy.

'I thought of him straight away.' Julius burst out: 'But who the hell is he?'

'I have no idea. Perhaps we should be gratified to arouse such interest.'

'There was that other character too. He was snooping.'

'Well, what do you want me to do about it, Julius?' Sammy said, smiling. 'Shall we lock up the shop tonight and go away for ever?'

'Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea.' He spoke sulkily. 'Louise has packed it in. And there's another thing . . . Bertie—I didn't have a chance to tell you before—when I tried to phone to put him off for this week, his landlady said she hadn't seen him for three days. He'd just gone off one night and she didn't know where he was.'

This piece of information appeared to interest the bookseller.

'She was telling the truth, you think?'

'How should I know? But all the same.'

'And what about Veronica and our photographer—have they disappeared too, leaving us alone on the sinking ship?'

'All right,' said Julius. 'I don't give a damn really. I was just telling you. It's up to you.'

'It is up to myself what I do, Julius,' said the bookseller. 'What you do is up to yourself . . . always. I have told you before, you are under no constraint.' He leant forward, and a more earnest note came into his voice. 'I agree with you, some kind of situation is building up. Certainly we cannot go on as we are doing for ever. It may be that our time is strictly limited. I know no more than you exactly what is happening, but I think we shall learn soon and we shall be able to make our dispositions accordingly. The situation is not yet out of control.'

Then he delivered an incontestable thrust of his affection: 'My dear, I have not forgotten my responsibility to you. I remember your horror of being locked up.'

Julius shrugged, spread his hands, as if to say: you're the boss.

'I agree, curious things are happening. I did not know about Bertie—that is odd certainly, but capable of a number of explanations. As for Louise, well . . .'

'But if she's having a baby?' Julius, perversely, now in his turn felt a need to reassure.

'That is what she said, and it is a perfectly adequate reason. In any event, sooner or later someone—whoever it is who is concerning himself with our affairs—will have to come to me. I shall wait until then.'

Julius suddenly felt a sharper stab of pain in his gum and grimaced.

The bookseller observed it. 'Toothache again? I think I can find something to help you.'

He rose and went into the studio. Julius stood up and took a few paces about the room. For an instant he felt weak and defenceless; perhaps the pain had something to

do with it, and Sammy's solicitude. His sedulously cultivated self-containment was a limitation, his solitude a punishment; he wanted to share, to belong, to act. He felt the sweat breaking out cold on his forehead and put a hand on to the desk to steady himself.

'Here you are.'

Sammy handed him the powder and a glass of water, as if he had observed nothing out of the ordinary. It was in a casual, conversational vein that he continued.

'Most of the great masters were great specialists in erotica also.' He indicated the books open on the desk, which—Julius saw now—were collections of art reproductions. 'Incidentally, all the metaphysical definitions of art which I have encountered would apply with even more relevance to pure pornography.'

Julius put the glass on the desk.

'Do you feel better?' Sammy closed one of the books. 'But let us be humble. We should not make too large a claim for our trade. It affronts the society in which we live—there is that to be said for it—and I should be proud to practise any trade which had that effect.' He was now stacking the books together.

'For some years I fought for a political revolution—you knew that, I believe. I used to be what is called a leader—until I cured myself, cured myself, that is, of the desire for power, which is the most destructive of human perversions, destructive of the individual psyche . . .'

The books stacked, he began to put the papers away in the drawers.

'And I discovered a great paradox: by fighting, by actively rebelling, one is inevitably accepting that which one fights against. At least, if one fights them on their own level, on their own terms. Our trade—and there are others, of course—is a purer, less self-destructive form of revolt, hastening the dissolution . . . and, perhaps, the re-birth . . .'

His last words were almost inaudible as he bent to lock the drawers.

'I have finished here now. I will walk along with you.'

It was less than an hour since Julius had entered the



bookshop, but in that time the whole character of the evening had altered: the public bars had closed, the theatres and cinemas had emptied and most of their audiences dispersed; now the nightwalkers had taken over, as if by right, no longer merely tolerated and furtive, but the manifest inheritors of the darkness—a different species almost, who for a few hours here and in the neighbouring streets would be true to their natures and autonomous.

Even the patrolling policemen were naturalized subjects of the same realm. The bookseller drew Julius's attention to a man, inconspicuous but sturdy, standing on a corner opposite a decrepit building which housed a number of clubs.

'He is a sergeant in the Vice Squad, and a curiously dedicated man.'

'Is he interested in us?'

'Almost certainly not. For our activities, they have a special unit, you know. Different people are attached to it from time to time—like Bateman, for instance—but it is quite a separate entity. Perhaps,' he added reflectively, 'they recognize unconsciously the unique nature of our trade.'

They were walking slowly, heavily, back on their heels—as other men might stroll with their families along a seafront on a Sunday afternoon.

'Leaving intellectual conviction out of it,' said Sammy, 'I should rather have liked to have been a policeman.'

'For God's sake!' said Julius, as near to being shocked as was in his nature.

'One would have been playing the same game, but for the opposing side.'

They passed the street where the girl had spoken to Julius. There were a number of women about, but he could not see her.

The anodyne must have been quick in its effect for his pain had gone. He felt suddenly that he knew why he had sought out the bookseller that evening. He was in need of answers, answers to questions which had not occurred to him before and which he lacked the capacity to propound—about the nature of reality and perception, and values

and the meaning of action. And if he did not put the questions now he would never put them—to the bookseller or to anyone else—and would never know the answers.

‘This is where I must leave you,’ Sammy said.

And all the rest of his life he would be like a fish threshing about in a bowl (this was the actual image which entered his mind)—water, glass, the distorted world beyond the glass, its own frenetic movements of an equal and indistinguishable unmeaningness.

‘Sammy!’

They had come to a halt on a corner, where the bisecting road ran down to a main thoroughfare, brightly lit, with a stream of cars and buses still passing.

‘Sammy!’

The bookseller, his glasses catching the reflection of a vermilion neon sign, was looking up at him blandly, quizzically.

It was a moment which seemed decisive; something said or done now could alter the entire unwinding ribbon of the future. There was a hint of interrogation in the attitude of the bookseller—caught, frozen, as in a still photograph, in an instant of suspended motion . . . Then he moved his head slightly and the vermilion sign exploded in his eyes; and they were the eyes of a man dramatically struck blind.

Julius muttered some form of ‘good-night’ and turned away. He was conscious of a bitter disappointment: it was the first time the bookseller had proved inadequate, the first time, Julius felt, that Sammy had let him down. But with this sense of betrayal, underlying it, there came an inkling of a knowledge more positive and important: an awareness that he had come to the point (on the unwinding ribbon of the past, the present and the future) where he could no longer look for answers outside himself, and would be held accountable for all his actions.

The pain in his gum still in abeyance, he went into a café for a bite to eat and a cup of coffee before going back to his solitary lodgings.

## Chapter 8

WHEN Bateman received the summons to report to the superintendent he felt neither surprise nor apprehension. It had been bound to come and, to a certain extent, the message brought comfort.

There was a two-hour lag between the time he received the summons and the time at which he was instructed to report. He continued with his work as usual, neither preparing a possible defence—which would, in any event, have been a hopeless activity—nor considering the consequences.

It had been bound to come, and if at first—during the early days of his infatuation and dereliction of duty—he had been able to force this knowledge into the deepest recesses of his mind, it had lately risen to the surface and become a growth whose abscission, however mutilating and painful, could only bring relief.

His conscious acceptance of the fact that his activities would inevitably lead to disaster dated from the benign day when they had all drunk wine outdoors under the morning sun. On that occasion Bateman's abrupt departure (which Julius had remarked) had been caused by his glimpse within of the man who, Bateman had reason to believe, had succeeded himself in the detail of obtaining evidence against the bookseller and his associates. He had kept this knowledge from the others—except Veronica. With her he had discussed lucidly the threat it posed and the probable consequences.

Lucidly! It might be supposed that, aware of their danger, they would have agreed to withdraw. There were arguments against such a course—primarily, that it could be maintained that the damage was already done and that any sudden action would only precipitate the inevitable retribution—; but Bateman knew in his heart, and supposed that she did also, that all such *lucid* arguments were merely rationalizations; that their withdrawal was literally impossible, and in the last resort—disaster, disgrace, and even possibly their irrevocable separation notwithstanding—

not to be desired. For: *whoever has, by nature, dealings with the tempter . . .*

At least, that is one possible explanation of what can be commonly observed every day: that men and women, and perhaps especially a man and a woman joined together, will frequently persist in a course of action which, judged *lucidly*, can be expected only to lead to disaster.

So when Bateman received the summons to report he continued calmly with his work. He broke off briefly to drink a cup of coffee with some of his colleagues, during which time they discussed matters of common interest, and he was obliged to listen to some facetious speculations concerning his coming interview.

About quarter of an hour before he was due to report he went to one of the few telephones in the building which was not lined through the police switchboard. He and Veronica had already discussed what should be done in such an eventuality, so he was not obliged to tell her much. Although the line was private, his language was guarded. It was such a conversation as takes place in wartime when a man, knowing that sooner or later he is to embark on a dangerous mission, has tidied up the ends of his personal life, and all that remains is to say: it's today.

'You know what to do.'

'Yes, darling.'

'At the worst, I'll be able to get a message to you later.'

'Yes.'

'Well, goodbye.'

'Goodbye, darling. I'll be waiting.'

The scene when he entered the office of the superintendent was almost an exact replica of that on the previous occasion. This time the windows were dry, and one was open a few inches at the top so that the noise of the traffic slightly modified the forbidding silence in which he was received.

As before, the superintendent's head was bent over a report open on his desk—not his own report on this occasion, Bateman observed.

'Sit down'—without even lifting his head. •

What conclusions could be drawn from the fact that

no one else was present? If it had been intended that he should be charged straight away, his own immediate superior would have been there. The third chair in the room, against the rear wall, was unoccupied; it was here that the superintendent's clerk would sit when called upon to take a shorthand note of any interview. But then this was a case without precedent in Bateman's experience. He ceased to speculate. He felt entirely calm.

'Bateman!'

When the superintendent finally raised his head, Bateman could see that his eyes were blood-specked and watering. He was known to be a man fond of beer, and Bateman assumed that he had been indulging this taste the previous evening.

'Yes, sir.'

The superintendent regarded him silently as he leaned back in his chair to enable him to open the drawer of his desk. From the drawer he extracted, first, a report which Bateman recognized as one of his own and, then, the distinctive folder which contained an officer's personal record. He placed these on the desk-top together, beside the report already open there.

His movements were slow, and today the myriad creases scoring his puffed and battered face appeared particularly deeply etched. Still looking at Bateman, he stubbed his forefinger on the open report.

The words should have come with the gesture; he moved his bloodless lips but nothing happened, so that the effect was like a film in which sound and picture are not in synchronization. He repeated the gesture, this time stubbing the report twice. And this time the words came. His voice—hoarse, smoky—seemed also to reflect the excesses of the previous evening.

'Bateman. You might know why I've sent for you. I've got a report here from Carter.'

Carter was the officer whom Bateman had seen in the public-house.

He still felt entirely calm.

Leaving the restricted zone, Bertie squeezed his foot on

the accelerator. The broad white road followed the curving coast-line. The early mist had lifted, and the cerulean sea was sparkling in the sunshine.

'Have you got enough petrol?'

He grunted in affirmation. He felt no animosity towards the girl at his side, rather the contrary, but he would have preferred to be alone, to have been able to savour the pleasure of the long drive ahead without talk, without the cloying insistence of her feminine presence.

She reached into the dashboard pocket, and lit a cigarette which she put between his lips. He had never smoked so heavily as during these past five days. Then she lit her own.

'Because we're flat broke now, you know that, don't you, darling?'

'There's enough in the tank to get us home.'

'I wouldn't like you to run out of petrol on me.' She laughed. 'It'd be a bit late for that corny trick, wouldn't it, darling, all things considered?'

'Uh-huh.' He felt no inclination to respond to her reminder of pleasures past.

She glanced at him fleetingly, registering his remote expression, and then rearranged herself in her seat, looking out of the side window.

Her appearance had altered: it was not just that her dress was slightly crumpled and that she wore no stockings; the entire effect was more careless, her hair was looser, her make-up less precisely applied, with rough patches around her cheek-bones. But she wore the same penetrating scent.

They drove on for about quarter of an hour in silence.

'See that.' Bertie indicated a well-known landmark, a white figure carved in the chalk of the hills.

She glanced briefly.

'It was crazy, darling, wasn't it? Crazy but nice.' She altered her position again, turning towards him. 'What are you going to do now?'

'See what happens.' He spoke grudgingly.

'You never telephoned, did you?'

'What are *you* going to do?' Bertie said. 'About Bassett, I mean.'

'Oh, don't tell me you care, darling,' the girl said. 'Please don't tell me you care.'

No, he did not care. What did she expect? Was he supposed to make a declaration of jealousy? Or did she imagine that the five days and five nights which they had spent together had given her a lien upon the future? They were five days out of time, having significance only in themselves, without relation to past or future. Later, maybe (but who the hell knew what was going to happen now in this bloody mess?) he might see her again—it would not particularly displease him—but for the time being she was only an impediment, like the roundabout on the road ahead, slowing his return.

'I just wondered.'

He braked as they came to the roundabout, eased the car into the right-hand fork, and then drove it forward at increased speed.

The camera was heavy. She again had to rest it on the pavement while she recovered her strength. Ordinarily her leg caused her no distress at all, but now it was aching, presumably because of the weight she was bearing.

A passing cyclist regarded her with some curiosity. She picked up the camera in its worn leather case, putting the strap over her shoulder. And then she was fortunate: before she reached the bus-stop, an unoccupied taxi came round the corner.

She paid off the taxi at the railway station and handed in the camera at the left luggage office. Even when she had rid herself of it, her leg still ached—or, more precisely, she felt a consciousness of its weakness.

She walked out into the forecourt of the station, frantic with buses and cars and taxi-cabs. Even here, in this smoky and grimy quarter of the city, where the sun's rays were always contaminated, it was easy to imagine that beyond the urban sprawl—on the coast, say—it would be a beautiful day, tonic and pellucid. She would have liked just to have boarded the first bus that she saw and have let it carry her to whatever its remote and improbable

destination. Instead, she had to fulfil the role assigned to her. Her actions, to herself, lacked credibility.

'I don't suppose it'll make much difference,' he had said, 'but I'll keep my mouth shut and we might as well make it as hard for them as possible.'

No, she could not believe in what was happening. It was a game—or just one more movement in what had always been a game, however absorbing and transcendental.

A voice to which—yes, truly—she was trying to listen was saying that this could be the end, the final movement, and she would be again alone and lost; but the message made no impact; other, more familiar, voices shouted it down in a chorus of reassurance.

In fact, as she crossed the forecourt of the station, Veronica smiled to herself, pleased with the manner in which she had carried out his instructions.

Where did she put the ticket for the camera? Oh, all right, it was in this pocket.

Have I done everything? The removal of the camera was the last of a number of tasks assigned to her in Bateman's flat; she ticked them off mentally. When the police went there they would find neither evidence against him nor anything which might lead them to her.

Her expression saddened. Of course, she did not wish to remain unimplicated. How could it be so—that she should be withdrawn from the game which he was still continuing?

She was standing at the stop for the bus which would take her back to her lodgings. Next to her was a woman carrying a small baby on her shoulder: the baby stared at Veronica with unfocused eyes, and she smiled at him.

Louise was having a baby—wasn't that wonderful? That meant Sammy would have to find a new girl. What sort of girl will she . . . for an instant the other voice became audible, saying there will be no new girl, the game is over for ever . . . girl will she be, I wonder?

The bus came in, and the woman hitched the baby higher on her arm. Veronica took a few paces behind her. And then she turned away.



It was the thought of returning to her own room which dismayed her. It was a room which Bateman had never entered, outside the board of their game, tolerable so long as the game was continuing, but now intolerable and menacing. She experienced a vivid premonition of how she would feel once she were there, of the voice becoming shriller and all-pervading.

In a wave of panic, she swept across the road, causing a taxi to swerve sharply and its driver to raise his eyes to heaven in an expression of outraged despair.

The other bus was already standing there, and she got on it, carried forward in the same unthinking movement. Now her expression and the way she compressed herself into the seat, hard against the side of the bus, making herself as small as possible, had become furtive and ashamed.

The last of his instructions had been: 'When you've finished, go back to your place, don't hang around the flat; they'll be coming there soon.'

Now she was disobeying, and the game was being played under new rules.

Her face had the tight, blank, sulky appearance of that of a child which is aware and ashamed of its misbehaviour but finds it impossible to amend it. As a reflex of her furtiveness or as some sort of unconscious gesture of propitiation, she got off the bus some distance away from Bateman's flat. Now she was walking with a pronounced limp.

No one saw her enter. She put the key in the lock and opened the door as silently as possible. In the room, too, where before she had carried out her tasks with a brisk, almost playful abandon, she now crept about on tip-toe, like an unlawful intruder. But at least the voice was inaudible. It could not make itself heard here above the voices of the memories which the flat contained.

For a while she moved about aimlessly, opening a drawer here, another there, putting things away. Then she kicked off her shoes and lay on the bed, supine and almost motionless, her breathing quick but shallow.

Quite soon a tongue of sunshine appeared on the ceiling,

and she turned her head, cradled in her arms on the pillow, to watch its flickering evolutions. It rapidly extended and became, no longer a tongue, but a river, with adjoining lakes and tributaries, the motes of dust a rainbow spray, rising and falling. She lay quite still.

She had heard no one on the stairs or in the corridor outside. The click of the lock turning was her first warning; then the front door slamming shut, with careless force.

She stuck her fingers deep into her throat and bit them to keep herself from crying out. There was blood in her mouth, but she was unaware of it.

The movements beyond the closed bedroom door were heavy and incautious. She lay absolutely still, her eyes fixed on the door. The handle turned and the door was thrown open.

'Well, I think I'll be off now.'

'All right, dear.'

Louise's impatience was boiling inside her but she remained outwardly calm as she faced her husband, the slender rod in his hand awkward to manœuvre in the narrow hallway.

'Have a good day. Bring back some fish.'

But he was reluctant to leave. 'Louise.' His hand was on the open door. 'Louise, it's not kicking yet, I suppose.'

She contrived to smile conspiratorially. 'Be off with you. Have a good day.'

It was entirely characteristic that, having brought himself tardily to utter that significant pleasantries, he should then depart satisfied, with no more than a casual wave of his hand.

As soon as he had gone, Louise went into the dining-room and turned off the radio. Then she returned to the hall. On the small polished table the telephone, machine-black, functional, insentient, regarded her as wickedly as a jungle animal. She could not even lift her hand towards it—as if it would snap off her fingers!

Yet this was the decision—firm and irrevocable—she had reached finally after the hours of fretful and con-

science-haunted sleeplessness beside her husband's satiated body; and had held, firmly clasped, as if it were a precious crystal, the repudiation of dishonour, during the occupied hours of the morning . . . until this moment, when . . . when suddenly the telephone leapt into life a foot from her, and its shrill ring drew her hand upon it like an imperative command.

'You've got the wrong number.'

Louise put the receiver back upon the hook but, the spell broken, kept her hand upon it, then raised it again and quickly dialled the familiar number.

'Hullo, Mr Samson. This is Louise. I've got something I want to tell you.'

His bulk filled the doorway.

'What are you doing here? I thought I told you . . .'

For a moment Veronica was incapable of movement. Then she flung herself off the bed and, stumbling, would have fallen full-length had Bateman not caught her.

He held her by the elbows. She looked up at him, her expression a mixture of guilt and relief.

'I'm sorry, darling, sorry. I know you did. I did everything you told me to, but I couldn't, couldn't . . . What happened?'

'Oh, nothing much.'

He released her and walked across the room. When he turned round his face was distorted in a manner she had never seen before.

'Nothing much,' he repeated. They were the only words he could get out before he collapsed in a helpless paroxysm of laughter.

At first Veronica watched with trepidation—she knew what restraints he habitually imposed upon himself, what chains he kept upon his expressions of feeling, especially those of pleasure—but then she began to laugh as well, rather uncertainly, and, finally, when he still seemed incapable of speech, she rushed upon him, shaking him with only a partially pretended fury.

'What happened? What happened?'

'Nothing much,' he said, still choking. 'Oh; nothing much.'

He regained control of himself and she released him.

'Nothing much, really,' he said. 'I was only congratulated, that's all. Commended.'

'No,' she said. 'I mean . . .'

'Yes,' he said. 'By the superintendent. Commended.' He did not appear at all amused now. 'Well, it wasn't quite like that.'

'Tell me, James.'

'That's what it amounted to.'

'Tell me.'

'It wasn't quite like that.'

He sat down on the bed and told her. It had not been quite like that. In a sense he had been reprovèd, officially—that is, on the official level—the superintendent, his watering eyes narrowed and malignant, reminding him, in short, sharp bursts of indignation, of primary regulations, of which even the newest and most stupid policeman would not be unaware; of the essential discipline of the force and the dangers both to the force and to the officer concerned of ignoring those regulations, that paramount discipline.

That occasion in the public-house had not been the first time Carter had seen him in association with the activities of the bookshop. He (Bateman) had denied nothing in the report; there was no call to do so; Carter's observations were flat, precise statements of fact. And besides—he only began to realize this after a little while—the superintendent was not asking for any explanation: he spoke as if he were fully aware of his subordinate's motives.

'But you are an experienced officer. You know all that. You know what you've laid yourself open to.' He paused to blow his nose.

When he went on, his manner had altered. 'I've been looking at your record, Bateman. You've a good record.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Seven commendations. The last one says something about "determination, perseverance and a high regard for the call of his duty".'

'Yes, sir.'

The superintendent had leaned back, rubbing his hand roughly over his none too carefully shaven chin. 'You didn't like being taken off this job, did you?' He continued without waiting for an answer. 'You thought you'd mucked it up. Determination's a police officer's greatest asset, it's worth more than all the . . .'

In a moment he (the superintendent) had been recounting the details of a case a quarter of a century ago, which had ended in a commendation from the Bench of himself (the superintendent, then only a detective-constable). 'I took a chance and I got away with it. That's the important thing—to get away with it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'All right, Bateman. I know why you kept after Samson. I might have done the same thing myself. I'm not telling you this officially. I've got a lot of time for an officer who sticks on the job, an officer who takes it as a personal affront to his dignity if some bent little bastard puts one over him. There aren't enough men like it in the force today—thinking of nothing but pay and conditions and the job they'll get when they're pensioned.' He was speaking with some force: a skin less worn and horny would have appeared flushed.

'I'm not telling you this officially. I want convictions, and I don't much care how I get them. But if you take a chance you've got to get away with it. You know what it's like in court these days—every shyster lawyer trying to make the police stand in the box. I don't mind if you consort with the devil, if it gets you a conviction. But if you break the rules, don't be found out.'

'No, sir.'

'I'll have you put back on this job. Carter hasn't got anywhere with it. I'll speak to the inspector.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'I want a conviction.'

'Yes, sir.' He was standing now.

'You're a keen man, Bateman. But don't be caught out.'

'No, sir. Thank you, sir.'

It did not seem quite so funny once he had told her, not sufficiently so, at any rate, to justify his helpless collapse into laughter.

'It's what you'd call ironic, isn't it?'

'I'm not sure I understand,' Veronica said. 'Does it mean he knows what you've been doing?'

Scarcely funny at all! 'Not all the way. That would be too much—even to get a conviction. Simply that I've got in with Sammy somehow.'

'What are you going to do now?'

Bateman stood up, spread his hands. 'That's the question.'

He was aware of a feeling of deflation, of anticlimax.

'You're going to tell Sammy about all this?'

'Yes,' he said, frowning. 'Yes, of course.'

'Here's the ticket for the camera,' Veronica said. She handed it to him. 'Because your superintendent will expect . . .'

'Yes, he will—sooner or later.'

She was standing close to him, and abruptly gripped his arms, her face taking on a winning, a consoling expression. She spoke with fervour.

'It doesn't matter, darling. It doesn't matter at all, really. Don't you see, it isn't going on anyway, something's going to happen, don't you see? Soon.' She had not thought of this at all: her words, designed as a consolation to him, were to herself a continuing discovery. 'I thought, when you phoned me, it was going to end today. But, don't you see, it's only postponed it? There's, there's . . . this and Louise's baby and everything.'

'It's coming to an end anyway. It's got to. I'm sure Sammy knows it too.' (That was another discovery.) 'He's only waiting for . . .' (But here her inspiration faltered.) 'He's only waiting. And Bertie, did you know he's disappeared somewhere?' She was clenching the stuff of his jacket, pulling him down to her. 'Don't you see, it doesn't matter what you do, what we do, any more? It's out of our control. It all depends on Sammy.'

'Perhaps it's out of his control too,' Bateman said.

'But it doesn't matter. To us it doesn't matter.'

She released him and fell back upon the bed. Bateman, far from laughter now, stood over her. He knew what she meant. In the important sense, nothing could touch them. Whatever happened, whatever had happened today, each in the other had found a true complement and salvation, even if it ended tomorrow. He put out a hand and laid it against her cheek, and then gently withdrew it.

‘I’d better get in touch with Sammy, I suppose.’

‘That was Bateman,’ the bookseller said, replacing the receiver.

‘Yes,’ said Julius. ‘So I gathered.’

‘First Louise, now Bateman—which includes Veronica. That leaves only the disappearing Bertie outstanding. I imagine he will complete the roll-call before long.’

‘What are you going to do?’ said Julius. ‘Those damned journalists are trouble enough, without the police.’

‘I think,’ said Sammy, smiling, ‘it is time we held a council of war.’

## Chapter 9

JULIUS had had only a few hours' broken and unsatisfactory sleep. Analgesics had dulled the sharp edge of the pain, but throughout the night his entire lower jaw had been an area of throbbing sensitivity, insistent even in his dreams. As soon as he had washed and dressed he went to the dentist who had performed the initial and flawed extraction.

Two pints of milk stood on the scored and unscrubbed doorstep. No one answered his ring. He hammered with his fist against the peeling door. Finally, the dentist himself opened it. He was wearing trousers and slippers and striped pyjama jacket; his face had the pallor and texture of untouched death. Julius turned away without a word.

He found another dentist's plate, but the dentist himself was not available. Time was getting short. The weather still held; it seemed hotter than ever—the intense climacteric of the dying summer. Already, so early, Julius's shirt was sticking to his back, his trousers rubbing between his legs. The light was too fierce, and stepping out of shadow into the sun was entering hostile and exposed ground.

The next receptionist told him to wait. When he was ushered into the surgery the examination was brief.

'This will be quite a job,' the dentist said. 'I'm afraid I can't tackle it straight away. What I can do: I'll give you an injection that will deaden the pain, and if you can come back at . . . Let me see the appointments book a moment, Miss . . .'

'Give me the injection,' Julius said.

Afterwards, although his jaw was numbed, he was still aware of the presence of the pain, like an intruder hammering at a locked door which must ultimately give way. His face felt lop-sided.

'I am surprised you have chosen this of all mornings to be late,' said Sammy. His tone was mild, however. 'But I decided it would be as well if we did not open today—I expect you saw I had put the notice on the door.'



He exuded strength and confidence and an air of well-being, of self-satisfaction even.

'Apart from our council of war, you see, we are to be visited by Mr Bassett.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I arranged it.'

No doubt about his self-satisfaction: his eyes gleamed behind his glasses; there was something childlike in his complacency.

'I thought . . .' Julius began.

'Yes,' said Sammy. 'When we considered taking this drastic step yesterday I rejected it because of my undertaking not to involve Louise. However, there was subsequently a fresh development: we have learned of Mr Bassett's machinations from another source. Bertie has returned to the fold, bringing with him comprehensive details of the enemy's intentions.'

He was sorting some books while he was talking, placing them in neat piles on the table. His movements were controlled, precise and habitual.

'In the light of what happens today, it will be interesting to consider whether the coincidence of their both delaying to inform us has had any significant effect on developments.'

'How did Bertie?' said Julius. 'Have they been chasing him up, too?'

'How does Bertie acquire the bulk of his knowledge?' said the bookseller, smiling. 'If one's intelligence is limited, one must make use of one's better developed functions. Incidentally,' he added, 'Bertie will be attending our council of war.'

'But not Louise?'

'Louise, no.' Sammy paused and went on to speak more earnestly than previously. 'In a way I am sorry our solidarity is broken, but it would not be right to insist upon her attendance. She is no longer one of us. We have served our usefulness to her.' He looked up at Julius. 'I do not intend that to sound bitter or wistful. I mean simply that Louise has moved on—as you will move on when the time comes, my dear. Now, however, it is up to us, it is our duty to protect her.'

Julius was far now from the mood which had sent him, vulnerable and dependent, to seek out the bookseller two nights before.

'You seem pretty sure of yourself.'

Sammy's reply was unashamedly arrogant: 'I feel confident of my ability to deal with a scandal journalist. I have previously had occasion to handle more formidable opponents.'

This morning, in fact, Julius's attitude of solipsistic indifference was firmly dominant, the antennae of attachment as numb as the nerves of his anaesthetized jaw. He merely shrugged.

Nettled maybe, the bookseller went on as if to answer the question he thought that Julius should have put. 'I cannot yet say *how* I shall deal with him, for I do not yet know what kind of man he is, which weaknesses feed upon him. Perhaps—that is why I am practising now—he will be susceptible to pomposity.'

But Julius was unresponsive. 'Then what about the police?'

Sammy stood up. 'Let us cross our bridges as we come to them. Perhaps it is time we all moved on. I would not consider that necessarily a defeat.' He looked at his wristwatch. 'The others will be here soon, and Bassett is due in just over an hour—although I expect he will be a little late if only to establish the principle of his importance or our unimportance. I have some work to do. You might take this occasion, Julius, to tidy up the shelves.'

Just as he had passed through the curtains, he put his head back in again. 'How is your tooth, Julius?'

Julius described briefly his visit to the dentist and then, the bookseller having withdrawn, obediently set about his work in the shop.

One or two potential customers stood in front of the door and read the notice which the bookseller had hung there—the same notice as on the day of Webber's funeral. One man, seeing the assistant within, attempted to attract his attention, but Julius ignored him. He had taken off his jacket, and the heat no longer disturbed him. His jaw was still totally insensible, like an insistent wedge of wood or

plastic—a hollow and soluble wedge, however, whose dissolution would release its contained scorpions of pain.

Bertie, customarily late, was the first to arrive. He would have been even earlier had he not had to leave his car some distance away from the shop because he could not find a nearer parking place. He also read the notice. Then he tapped lightly on the glass until Julius came to admit him.

‘Not late, am I?’

He was chastened and contrite, mopping his brow.

‘Only about five days,’ said Julius.

‘Hell, yes, I know. I know. I’m sorry. I told Sammy.’

He had telephoned the bookseller as soon as he had returned to the city and had dropped the girl. He had recounted everything which she had imparted to him relative to Bassett’s plans. It had been his intention to withhold the fact that he had come by this information some days before; he had, however, found himself disclosing this, too, in answer to Sammy’s gentle and innocent questioning.

‘You know what it is. You get with a girl.’ He smiled uneasily at Julius. ‘No harm done though, is there?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ said Julius. ‘You’d better ask Sammy. Perhaps it’s all been in the paper by now. I wouldn’t know. I never look at them myself.’

‘Hell!’ said Bertie. Consciously or otherwise, both he and the girl had refrained from buying Bassett’s newspaper while they had been away.

He smiled again, even more uneasily. ‘Come off it. You’re kidding me.’

To do him justice, it was not for himself that he was primarily alarmed now; it was the sense of having let down the others—the side, the team—which ravaged him: the guilt of his betrayal.

‘Where’s Sammy?’

‘He’s inside. He’s busy.’

‘Shall I go in?’

‘As you like.’ Julius was not going to help him at all—whether as a punishment for Bertie’s dilatoriness or from pure malice—he did not ask himself. He continued to work at the shelves.

Bertie hovered. 'I had a bit of trouble at work too. I told them I was sick, too sick to reach a telephone and all on my own. They didn't believe me, of course, but if I can wangle a doctor's certificate there's damn-all they can do about it. Do you think I'd better go in and see Sammy?'

'Up to you.'

'Well, if he's busy.'

Bertie continued to hover. 'There's one thing, the car goes like a dream.'

Sweating, blundering, he was like a large dog, aware of misdemeanour and fearful of his master's reaction. His self-confidence was shattered and only Sammy's benison—his pat or his blow—would restore it.

Bateman and Veronica arrived together, almost to the minute of the time designated. She held to his arm. There was no point in concealment now, whether Carter was still watching or not. Since the previous day Bateman had come fully to realize that he had been granted only a brief reprieve; there was no possible course of action which could lead to an ultimate stay of execution.

Together they shared an attitude of fatalism—not the fatalism of despair, however, but that of an acceptance which transcends hope, calm and impregnable in its confidence that that which had been already gained could not now be lost.

She had stayed with him all the previous night. In the morning, before they got up, lying in the shadowed half-light of dawn, she had said: 'Can't I stay with you now all the time?'

'Why not? I can put that in my report, too, can't I? Perhaps they'll even pay your removal expenses and you will be able to share the credit when they promote me.' His voice, however, was free of bitterness.

For her part, Veronica was happy at the prospect finally of leaving her shabby and constricted room, which had become a symbol of the shabbiness and constriction of the existence which she had already left behind.

They, too, read the notice behind the glass. Bertie observed them, and they saw him attract the attention of Julius, who came over to admit them.

'What, Bertie here first!' Veronica was astounded. 'Couldn't you sleep last night?'

Bertie shuffled.

'I know, it's that car. It gets you here before you've started.'

'You were going to show me the car,' Bateman said.

'Sure,' said Bertie, brightening. 'Of course. I had to park it . . .'

Veronica said: 'And what's the matter with you, Julius? You look washed out.'

'Nothing. A bit of toothache.'

'It's these damn trade vans. There ought to be a law.'

Already something of their solidarity had been re-established. Indeed, after the various stresses of the preceding days, and with the unusual circumstance of the shop being closed, they all—even Julius, visibly relaxing—seemed to absorb the freedom of a holiday atmosphere. Julius was reminded of the day of the cremation. It seemed a long while ago.

'Perhaps we'd better go and see the boss.'

'Louise isn't coming?'

'She drives like a dream, I tell you.'

'Isn't it wonderful about her baby?'

They went through the red curtains in a group. The studio was empty and Julius led the way into the bookseller's office, where Sammy rose from his customary chair to greet them.

Bertie was welcomed in just the same manner as the others—which was more reassuring, actually, than a verbal pat, which would have indicated that he had merited a special forgiveness. He sat on the edge of his chair, leaning forward, trying to create an impression of eagerness and close attention, as the bookseller began to outline the diverse circumstances which had led to this extraordinary meeting. In fact, however, he was only awaiting Sammy's reference to his (Bertie's) own particular involvement, and absorbed little of what preceded it.

When this point was reached, Sammy described objectively the information which Bertie had obtained from the girl and the manner in which he had acquired it,

not concealing his delay, but neither stressing it nor condemning.

Bertie began to relax. He stole a glance at Julius, whose expression was indecipherable.

'So to a degree we are indebted to the happy coincidence of Bertie's acquaintanceship with Mr Bassett's mistress,' Sammy was saying. 'It does occur to me that, perhaps, coincidence is not the right word, that this acquaintanceship was fostered, even possibly initiated, by the unscrupulous Mr Bassett.' He paused very briefly.

'But that is only a supposition. I may be maligning Mr Bassett, for we have no knowledge of the history of this relationship.'

Neither by visual hint nor inflection did he invite Bertie's intervention. Indeed, it was with surprise that Bertie heard his own voice . . . his own voice telling the bookseller, telling them all, with a gradually decreasing confidence as his own words became audible to himself, of his first encounter with Bassett and the girl and of his calamitous indiscretion, the starting point, the genesis of their present crisis; the secret which before he had revealed to no one.

When he had finished, leaving a phrase hanging in the air, he sat red-faced and damp, his throat too swollen for him even to express his contrition. He could not meet their eyes.

'That explains a good deal,' Sammy was saying. 'Now we know how it all began.' He paused, and was looking at Bertie, but he, head-hung, could not see it. 'Do not feel too ashamed, Bertie. It was foolish and it was indiscreet.' He paused again, and then seemed to be addressing himself primarily to Julius, who was himself staring angrily at Bertie.

'But we have all been guilty of indiscretions. It is a matter of chance that some entail no ill consequences while others do. At least, you had the excuse of alcohol.'

Julius opened his mouth and shut it again.

'I'm sorry,' Bertie managed to say finally.

'And we know something else about Mr Bassett now,' the bookseller went on. 'That is partly why I called this

council of war before his arrival, in order that we might pool our knowledge. It is interesting and significant that he is addicted to alcohol, for that propounds a self or cosmic dissatisfaction, which we might be able to put to good use.'

The bookseller then went on to relate—in the same precise and equable manner, as discreet and unhistrionic and as characteristic as the chocolate-brown suit he was wearing, the soft cream collar, the single-toned tie—the story of Louise's encounter with Bassett's henchman, her surrender to his threats and blandishments and her subsequent repentance. Again, neither by word nor tone did he imply censure or disappointment. On the contrary: it seemed that he considered her action finally in disclosing her betrayal more than atoned for the betrayal itself, justifying it or even sanctifying it retrospectively.

'Louise, as you will appreciate, has always been in a rather different position from ourselves. It denotes some perspicacity in Mr Bassett that he should have discerned it. In the last resort, each of us here is responsible for only his or her self; in her the self is, you might say, corporate, and so it has always been more difficult for her; her loyalties have been divided. Now that her loyalty to us has finally proved, if not dominant, co-equal, we must accord to her an equivalent loyalty.'

No one seemed inclined to dispute it. Perhaps, of his four listeners only Bateman, whose training and experience had accustomed him to the difficult task of listening, had indeed followed the bookseller's exposition closely. To the others—as often happens—it had been like a stream running roughly parallel to, sometimes merging with and sometimes diverging from, the streams of their own thoughts.

Bertie was still clearly sunk in the shame of his own confession, seeking in Louise's actions only that which would render his own more palatable.

Julius, since his earlier brief display of anger, had seemed entirely withdrawn, his expression indicating an absorbed preoccupation with some private conflict.

As for Veronica—at one point she had jerked forward in her chair, opening her mouth to speak; had restrained

herself, but had remained poised at that same point, oblivious to all that had followed.

When the bookseller paused, she could restrain herself no longer.

‘Do you mean she isn’t really having a baby?’

Sammy smiled. ‘It was the first excuse that came to her mind. But it would not be the first time that the word has preceded or inspired the deed.’ He looked at his watch.

‘There is not much time before our visitor is due: there is one other matter I wish to refer to.’ He commanded their attention.

‘When we have disposed of Mr Bassett our troubles will not be over entirely. It seems that the police are concerning themselves very particularly with our affairs. I am afraid that it may even become necessary for us to suspend our activities. Do you not think so, Mr Bateman?’

Bateman made merely a gesture of disavowal.

‘That would be your professional advice, would it?’

‘It’s up to you,’ Bateman said. He sensed that the bookseller required something more of him.

‘Perhaps,’ Sammy persisted, ‘you would tell us, for the benefit of us all, what the present position is.’

Bateman had become so accustomed to complicity that it was only when he—outlining the details of the police investigations—observed Bertie’s air of bemused astonishment that he recalled that Bertie (and the absent Louise), although aware that he was a policeman, had never been told of his original and now resumed role of officially appointed spy. He realized simultaneously that the bookseller’s persistence had been directed to making him now reveal this fact himself.

This was clearly for the benefit of Bertie, who at one stage was provoked into outraged and contemptuous expostulation. Bateman further realized—with an appreciation of which he might not have been capable a few weeks before—that Sammy’s aim had been to provide the guilt-ridden Bertie with another object for his previously self-directed contempt and anger.

When Bateman reached the point of his last interview with the superintendent, Bertie again broke in.



‘And now you’ll start spying on us again!’

Then Veronica intervened, with an indignant defence of Bateman’s loyalty, even appealing to Julius for confirmation, and obtaining a reluctant admission . . . while the bookseller, bland, serene, impervious, regarded them all benignly, with the air of a teacher indulging his favourite students, or, perhaps, of a puppet-master as his dolls danced to the strings in his hands.

In the end—and again Bateman was appreciative of the subtlety and the timing, their fraternity having been re-forged in the blaze of temporary anger—the bookseller called them to order.

‘The journalist will be here very soon. Let us prepare ourselves. There is just one more item: please let me conduct this in my own way. I cannot say how our interview will develop, but any intervention . . .’—he looked round at all of them, his eyes resting on no one longer than the others—‘any unexpected intervention could be damaging; it could, indeed, be fatal to our prospects.

‘Julius, please go and wait for him in the shop.’

Julius rose obediently.

‘Is your toothache troubling you?’

Julius’s face was pale and his mouth was slightly contorted.

‘It’s all right.’

He left the office, and the others—Bertie, Veronica, Bateman and the bookseller himself—assembled themselves to await their visitor.

In the shop, Julius leant, half-concealed, against the row of shelves farthest from the door. Already the effect of the anaesthetic was wearing off: the pain was not yet severe, but it had developed sufficiently to presage its unqualified regression.

Sammy rearranged the chairs. He had made it clear that he had nothing further to say about the impending visit, and the others, their previous disagreements now forgotten, talked about different matters.

From his position in the alcove, Julius could observe the entire width of the windows. More people stopped to read the notice within the door. The roadway itself was still in

shadow, but the sun shone full on the shops on the other side, anointing the dingy brickwork with gold and exploding the glass into fiery fulguration. .

The large and mud-stained black car drew up directly outside the bookshop. Julius recognized the man who alighted from the nearside passenger seat as his antagonist with the well-filled and flaunted wallet. For the appearance of the driver of the car Julius was less prepared, although he had encountered him also before—in fact, just about where he was now standing, on the doorstep of the shop. A mental tumbler turned and Julius recalled as well the streetwalker's contemptuous description of the snooper.

The two stood talking briefly: Julius could see their lip movements, as if he were watching a film whose sound track had broken. The younger man indicated the notice, and they both came close to the door to read it.

The lips of the younger man moved again as they peered into the shop. Julius smiled grimly: it was as if a sub-title had appeared on the silent screen: 'Do you think the birds have flown?'

The sound track was restored as Bassett impatiently tried the door handle, continuing to clatter it up and down after it must have been quite apparent that the door was locked. Then he hammered with his fist on the glass, just beside the face of his assistant, still peering closely within.

Julius waited until the knocking had ceased, waited another minute, savouring their expressions of irritated frustration, and then stepped out of the alcove, moving with a slow indifference exaggerated even for him, not looking towards the door, on the way to which he halted to straighten an already straight row of books, and heard again the angry rattle of Bassett's fist against the glass.

He looked up only as he reached the door, his face a matter of inches—the clear glass between—from the two faces outside. He flickered his eyes briefly from one of the two faces to the other, as if this were the first time he was seeing either and was by either equally unimpressed. He took just a little longer than was necessary to unlock the door and then stepped back, leaving it to the younger man

outside actually to release the door handle, to push the door inwards, and then to stand aside to admit first, of obvious right, the journalist Clinton Bassett.

Julius did not speak. Bassett stepped past him into the shop, followed by his assistant. Julius closed and locked the door slowly and slowly turned again. Bassett was standing in the middle of the shop—the other beside him like a courtier—staring at Julius with impatience and distaste.

‘This is Mr . . .’ the courtier began, but was interrupted.

‘Where’s your boss?’ There was impatience in Bassett’s voice, too, but otherwise it was neutral.

He looked tired and sick, and when he began to fumble in his jacket pocket for a packet of cigarettes, Julius was unexpectedly reminded of the photographer Webber.

‘This way.’ Julius’s voice was even more empty of expression.

For a little while he had forgotten his infected jaw, but a fleeting spasm made him aware of it again. He was no longer concerned to scorn or to provoke. He walked past them and they followed him, Bassett’s cigarette unlit in his mouth. Julius drew aside the red curtains, even making a gesture towards holding them apart for Bassett, led the way quickly through the empty studio—even the ghosts of their perverse and simulated lusts dormant now—knocked on the office door, opening it almost simultaneously, without waiting for an answer, and ushered them in. When they had entered, he followed and shut the door behind them.

Veronica and Bateman were both familiar with the dramatic and portentous profile that headed the Clinton Bassett column, but it was difficult to reconcile the weary and commonplace features of the man who had entered with that imposing outline; the lineaments were corrupted, as if melted down by a corrosive acid.

Bassett stood just within the door, looking first at the bookseller, who was rising from his seat behind the desk, then quickly and impassively at the others in turn, then back at Sammy. The younger man who had entered with him flicked open a lighter and held it to the unlit cigarette between the famous journalist’s lips.

'Mr Bassett.' The bookseller's tone was almost deferential, but he made no effort to extend his hand.

Bassett drew on his cigarette. 'So you're all here,' he said, without removing it from his mouth. 'Perhaps it's just as well.'

Having put away his lighter, the younger man was standing in an attitude exactly like that of his senior.

'Not the one I saw.' It was a whisper, conspiratorial.

'No, no.' Bassett's tone was again impatient, even distracted. He jerked his head at the bookseller. 'You're Samson—or is it Samuels?'

Sammy merely nodded, smiling. 'Won't you sit down? We'll get another chair. Julius.'

Julius fetched a chair from the studio for Bassett's assistant, whose presence had not been allowed for. There were now seven people in this relatively small room, creating an effect of improvisation and of urgency. No one, however, seemed eager to open, and of them all only Bertie displayed any sign of agitation. He had blushed heavily and sullenly on Bassett's entry, and was now staring at him with half-ashamed malevolence. Bassett was seated in front of the desk, the others were more or less against the three walls which came within the range of the bookseller's vision.

Bassett looked round again, exhaling.

'We've met before,' he said, as his eyes passed over Bertie.

'You must be the cop.'

He let his gaze rest a little longer on Veronica, seated beside Bateman, but said nothing to her.

He shook the ash from his cigarette on to the floor.

'All right then, let's get started. I haven't got all day.' In a curious way, his rudeness seemed somewhat defensive. He was addressing the bookseller but not looking at him, his eyes, puckered against the smoke, seemed fixed in the direction of the bronze owl on the edge of the desk.

'You're going to ask me not to publish. You're going to tell me your solicitors will bring a libel action. You're going to swear you've never been making these things, and even though you haven't been making them you'll

stop making them now.' (He was experienced, his weary manner proclaimed, in all human frailty, which reduced him to a state of bored prostration.) 'You'll say I've no proof, but you'll offer me whatever you think it's worth to you not to make a story out of what you haven't been doing, and what, anyway, you'll stop doing, and the story will cost my paper thousands of pounds in damages if I print it.' He coughed and stopped speaking as if finally his distaste and boredom had overcome him totally.

Sammy pushed across an ashtray, in which the journalist stubbed out his cigarette.

'When I telephoned to suggest this meeting'—the bookseller's tone was gently conversational—'you told me, Mr Bassett, that in any event you had intended to see me. I gathered there was something you wanted from myself.'

'I'll hear what you have to say. I always do. I like to have both sides of it'—he was feeling for another cigarette—'Samson or Samuels, or whatever you call yourself now. I'll take a statement from you, and I'll print it if I think it's . . . '—his boredom was such that he did not even pause to seek the word which momentarily eluded him. 'But I've got my story anyway, whether I get a statement from you or not.'

Again his assistant, Hobbs, flicked his lighter.

'One thousand pounds,' said the bookseller, in the same easy tone. 'Two thousand. Given a little time, perhaps more.'

The journalist permitted himself a humourless and exaggerated grin. 'Bribery!' he said. 'I shouldn't be surprised, should I? I'm putting the black on you—you would think that, wouldn't you, Samuels? You got away with it yourself when you were charged with blackmail, didn't you, Samuels? Acquitted.' He now appeared to be talking rather to the others. 'But you didn't get away with the rest of it, did you? What was it? False pretences and forgery? That's your form, isn't it, apart from publishing obscene publications? Was it two years you got?'

'Eighteen months,' said the bookseller. 'On both charges, the sentences to run concurrently.' He also was smiling. 'Not blackmail then. You are not to be bribed—

the incorruptible press. Will you have a drink, incidentally? I forgot to ask you.'

'And there was some question of your nationality. That's right, isn't it?' Bassett glanced at his assistant, but did not wait for confirmation. 'And whether you could be deported. And that's why you're calling yourself Samson now, Samuels.'

'I had used that name previously,' said the bookseller mildly. 'I have some claim to it. Did you say you would have a drink?'

'No.' The monosyllable was stentorian; he might have been resisting a threat.

From Bertie burst a curious noise, something between a snigger and a snort—perhaps involuntary. Up to then only Samson and Bassett had spoken, but when the latter turned to look at Bertie, he, red-faced and uncertain, shouted out: 'You never touch it!'

Bassett was regarding him with contempt and acute dislike. 'Pretty boy! The great lover!'

He looked then at Veronica. The interruption seemed to some extent to have re-charged his batteries. There was a certain calculated lechery in the way in which he ran his eyes over the girl, transferring his gaze to Bateman then, with only a slow reluctance.

'And a crooked policeman. That's good. There's nothing the public likes better. They never feel so virtuous as when they hear of a crooked policeman.'

Bateman said nothing. Because of his experience of interrogations, he had been instinctively apprehending the rhythm and nuances of the duel between Samson and Bassett to a degree of which the others present were incapable. The journalist now, lashing out blindly, was giving ground.

'You're a beast.' It was a childish, a schoolgirlish expletive; and Veronica's expression was that of innocence outraged—flushed and sharpened.

Bateman put out a restraining hand, and shook his head reprovingly, but Bassett, to his surprise, appeared to be taken aback. The smile with which he attempted to belittle her naïve affront was somewhat uncertain; he opened his mouth as if to speak, but said nothing.

Julius's attention throughout had been for the bookseller alone. He, through his intimate knowledge, had observed Sammy's minimally revealed displeasure upon Bertie's outbreak; at this latest intervention, however, the bookseller had, surprisingly, appeared commensurately satisfied.

After a due pause, Sammy was again the correct and courteous host: 'Perhaps a drink for Mr . . .?' He inclined his head in the direction of the younger journalist.

Before Hobbs could reply, Bassett had made a sweeping and violent gesture with his hand, as if to say: let's get on with it.

'You are not to be bribed then,' Sammy said, acquiescing. 'You must excuse me. My dealings with the British press have been limited. Different conventions apply in some other countries, as you are probably aware.'

'Or is it that you are not to be bribed with money, the sordid but relatively guileless cash transaction—for you would agree with me surely that every man has his price, even if he himself does not always know what that price is?'

'Listen, Samuels,' said Bassett. 'I've got an appointment in half an hour. I haven't got any time to waste. If there's anything you want to say to me I'll listen. Hobbs'll take it down. You know what I want.'

'All right,' said Sammy. He waited politely for the younger journalist to produce his notebook.

'We have been producing and distributing pornographic material. The room through which you passed on entering here has been, as one might put it, the altar of our activities. I have been the presiding genius, and Miss Barclay, Mr Bateman and Mr Dodds have been my collaborators, along with the other lady, whom I believe your assistant recently interviewed. We should prefer—perhaps I am stating the obvious—that you put nothing of this in your newspaper.'

'You'd . . .' The journalist's face appeared dilated, the veins dangerously swollen. 'That's what you'd prefer, is it? I bet you would, I bet you bloody would. Then you're going to be disappointed, aren't you?'

'Why?' said the bookseller.

Bassett had lurched forward, his eyes bulging. 'Because I'm going to print it, that's why.'

'I meant,' said Sammy, 'why do you feel obliged to print it?'

At least Bateman and Julius (although now the pain had finally penetrated the analgesic barrier, demanding complete capitulation and inevitably limiting his capacity to perceive) could recognize the bookseller's quickening gratification.

'You turn out this dirt, you take a chance.' Bassett ejected the words with the smoke. 'You're caught, you have to take what comes.'

'Yes,' said Sammy, patiently. 'That is granted. But in fact I was asking why you'—he placed only the slightest stress upon the pronoun—'consider yourself obliged . . .' He paused, in anticipation of the interruption.

'We're journalists. We have a duty to the public.' The tone lacked the pride of the content; it was like—if not an apology—an admission.

Hobbs leaned forward, as if he would reinforce his senior's claim, but no one took any notice of him.

'You mean,' said the bookseller, 'you consider yourself to have a moral duty? You see this as a contest between good and evil—yourself the representative of decency, public order, the social well-being, and I, with a cloven foot, the apotheosis of malignancy?' It would have been difficult to detect any irony in his intonation. 'Surely nothing is so simple. If it were so once upon a time, it is not any longer.'

While Samson had been speaking, Bassett had been lighting another cigarette. He rallied.

'Go on. You want us to take a note of this?'

'I was frank with you,' said Sammy. 'I am suggesting that in putting forward a duty to the public as your motive, you are being less than frank with us.'

At last Hobbs got his word in. 'The press may not be perfect, but it performs a duty when it exposes public evils.' Not only his gestures, but his entire tone of voice was curiously similar to that of his senior.



'Ah, yes,' said Sammy. 'And if the devil did not exist, it would have been necessary to invent him.' As a matter of courtesy, he addressed his first words to Hobbs, but continued, speaking directly to Bassett.

'But perhaps not for the reasons generally advanced: perhaps because we need a symbol of the dark and subterranean forces we ignore or rationalize at our extreme peril. Erotica has a longer and nobler tradition than journalism, Mr Bassett—but, possibly, after your fashion you serve the same cause.'

'I ask you again: why do you feel obliged to write in your newspaper about our activities? Perhaps that is another way of saying again: what is your price?'

The room was not unbearably hot, but an oppressive airlessness had developed, undoubtedly attributable in the main to the number of people present, but perhaps also, as in the theatre when the audience feels a high point of dramatic conflict to be imminent, to a sense of mounting tension, nervous and claustrophobic.

Veronica, in particular, after her brief outburst, was dangerously taut, unable to find a position for her arms and hands in which she could control their trembling. To herself, her breathing sounded abnormally loud. She was not following the arguments of Bassett and the bookseller, but, like a child or an animal, reacting directly to the conflict of personalities, of which those arguments were merely a formal expression.

Of the two protagonists, the bookseller appeared far and away the more at ease. Had Julius, who knew him best, been fully himself, he might have detected signs of effort and excitement in a certain tightening of the muscles of his face, the contraction of his pupils, a slightly more wilful use of gesture; but to the others certainly he seemed entirely as they had always known him, cool, suave, masterful.

There was, on the other hand, a quality of disarrangement about the journalist: his forehead was glistening, his tie had slipped, cigarette ash smeared his shirtfront and the lapels of his jacket, and his movements lacked co-ordination. At this moment the hand in which he

was holding his cigarette was pumping up and down meaninglessly.

'Leave my motives out of it. What about your own? What about your own—eh? No wonder you're so self-satisfied. Do you think it doesn't stand out a mile?' He brushed his knuckles against his mouth, as if his denture had slipped.

'A criminal psychopath—that's how the judge described you, isn't it, or was it your defence counsel or some fake psychiatrist? It doesn't matter. I've known scores . . . all the symptoms . . . above all, an arrogant bloody belief in your own cleverness and superiority. That was what they called you, wasn't it?' He had momentarily a gleeful air, as if his pumping hand had snatched an irrefutable argument from under his adversary's eyes.

'A criminal psychopath,' Sammy repeated, savouring the words. 'It is an agreeable phrase, and disposes conveniently of values which one cannot comprehend. The criminal psychopath of today is the judge of tomorrow. Perhaps that is a little too glib, but . . .'

He had quietly changed his tactics. It was a technique with which Bateman was familiar: by exaggerating the traits which your opponent most fears or despises you provoke him into an excessive rage, which, when it has spent itself, leaves him chastened and doubly vulnerable.

'Obsessed by your own bloody cleverness and sure you'll never be found out. I've known scores . . . pimps and murderers and . . .'

His diction, like his words, was getting wilder. But why did Bassett stay? That was what Bateman could not understand. He had not been brought here under duress; he was not being interrogated in a bare room, with a blank-faced policeman behind him, back against the door. Also, he was not a fool; he could not, despite his agitation, be unaware of what was happening to him. Surely he had all that he wanted or needed for the purposes of his newspaper article. Then, what else was he seeking?

Bassett had just ended his diatribe, a doleful expression on his face now contrasting with his earlier brief jubilation and also with his words' hopeful vehemence. It was at this

point that the younger journalist, sitting beside Bassett, pushed out his left arm, drawing back his cuff, and indicated with the forefinger of his other hand the watch upon his narrow wrist.

The bookseller, who had begun to reply, paused in deference.

'What? What?' Bassett seemed to be half-dazed, like a man suddenly woken from a dream.

He looked at his own watch, holding it close to his eyes, but it seemed unlikely that in fact he registered the time.

'Your appointment with Niccolini.' Hobbs whispered it, but he might just as well have shouted.

Bassett pulled himself together. 'All right, all right, I haven't forgotten.' He looked at his watch again.

'You go and see him. Tell him I got held up.' He was smiling with something resembling malice. 'Tell him he can go ahead, but if those dancers leave the country, I'll have his . . . All right. What are you waiting for?'

Hobbs had stood up, but was dithering.

'Shall I take the car?'

'Of course take the bloody car.' He had raised his voice. 'As I can't drive it, it'd be a lot of use to me, wouldn't it? And come back here afterwards.'

The last words were directed at Hobbs' retreating back. Sammy nodded towards Julius, who obediently got up and accompanied the young journalist. They did not speak. As Julius held open the door of the shop, Hobbs looked him in the face, but if he had intended to say anything thought better of it. Julius locked the door behind him.

The rhythms of pain are unpredictable. At present, although the whole of one side of his face was aching and tender, Julius was holding on, treating the pain as if it were purely subjective, to be felt or ignored according to his will.

Through the window, he watched Hobbs extricate the mud-stained car from the exiguous space left to it. He all but came into contact with the van behind, and it seemed chance rather than a niceness of judgment which

averted a collision. Pulling away finally, he baulked a motor-cyclist.

When Julius re-entered the office everything had altered. Sammy was on his feet, and so were Bateman and Veronica. Bassett was still seated in the same chair, but his posture was entirely different, making him appear smaller, humbler. Only Bertie, sullen and oafish, legs extended, remained in the same position as before, and something in the glint of his eye as he regarded Bassett indicated that he, too, was not unmoved.

Veronica's distress was manifest. Bateman had his arm about her and was whispering into her ear. She supported herself against the desk; her head had dropped, her hair fallen loose.

'It's all right. It's all right.'

Sammy cast a look at Julius, commanding silence.

In a moment, Veronica partially recovered herself. She lifted her head and stepped away from Bateman's adjunctive arm, but her face had a luminous pallor and her eyes were distraught.

'It is too hot for her in here. There are too many people.' Sammy was addressing Bateman. 'Will you take her home?'

Bateman was looking at the bookseller as if he would discern some unspoken meaning, but finally nodded and again took the girl by the arm. She allowed herself to be led across the room.

'If you feel that you can safely leave her, I should be glad if you would come back.'

At the door, Veronica half-turned.

'I meant it,' she said. 'I would have been willing. I thought . . .'

'Yes,' said the bookseller. 'Yes, I know.'

'I wasn't just . . . saying it.'

'I know.' There was encouragement and concern in his voice and also gratitude.

As Veronica looked at him a cloud of doubt seemed to shadow her face, but it passed as quickly as it had come, and it was with an air almost of confidence that she turned to Bateman again, and they left the room together.

Through all this Bertie had not moved, but his eyes had followed Veronica and Bateman to the door. Only the journalist—and even to Julius this seemed odd, for it could scarcely be attributed to an excessive sensibility—had appeared to ignore the entire scene, sitting huddled, shrivelled, still facing the desk, from beside which Sammy now looked down upon him.

‘Well, that was not your price then, either. How could she have made such a mistake?’ He was speaking gruffly, like a doctor trying to rouse a hypochondriac patient.

‘In that regard, if in that regard alone—I mean, an awareness of when they are desired—the intuition of women is usually sound. For that was what she meant. You knew that. You did understand that, Bassett.’ An edge of incredulity inserted itself.

‘Do not tell me that you failed to understand. Despite the somewhat cryptic terms of her invitation, her offer, you knew what she intended. And you declined—at least, in not accepting, you rejected, as categorically as a blank refusal.’

Julius was behind the journalist, could see only his bowed back. To Bertie his face was visible in profile, but there was nothing to be gathered from it of what Bassett thought or felt.

‘So that was not your price. “Whatever you want”—that was what she said. She knew that you had seen her in attitudes of lust, and then here, when you looked at her, your eyes contained the image of those obscene attitudes. “Whatever you want,” she said. But you rejected her. So that was not your price either—or, at least, your full price.’

The bookseller looked down at him for a moment in silence and then returned to his seat behind the desk.

‘I think we might all have a drink now.’

When Bassett was given the glass he looked at it for an instant as if surprised to find it in his hand; then he swallowed its contents in one quick movement. The bookseller refilled the glass.

Bertie drank in the same manner. He had relished the journalist’s humiliation, but it had not assuaged his

hatred. By a curious paradox, his passionate revulsion towards Bassett was of the same quality—unreasoning, self-righteous, fearful—as that which the nominally virtuous feel towards those who flout society's conventions. The sharp spirit burned in his throat.

The bookseller had poured a glass for himself, but took only a single sip from it before putting it down on the desk beside the graven metal image of the owl.

'And so you are still here, Bassett,' Samson said gently. From a single or double reflection, a solitary spear of sunlight had entered the room, falling across the desk and the bookseller's hands resting there, illuminating the soft, golden hairs on the dark skin of his wrists.

'Still here. Having your story now, having seen us all, heard us speak, received our confessions—and yet you cancel an appointment and are still here with us. What else do you want from us? What further revelations? What other all-embracing offers?'

'Go on,' said Bassett. 'Go on. Keep talking.' He had rallied. Surprisingly, perhaps, there was a kind of stubborn humour in his voice. 'Half a journalist's pay is for listening.'

He drank from the second glass, but with more restraint, not emptying it.

'And you are a very efficient and experienced journalist, Mr Bassett: more than that, you are uniquely the archetype of contemporary . . .'

'Go on. Go on,' said Bassett.

' . . . contemporary journalism, which is at the same time society's inspiration and reflection, font of its values and its symbols.' Beneath the irony, there seemed to be a teasing affection, of the kind which sometimes exists between old friends.

'So why are you still here? What are you waiting for me to say? What more can I say for the further titillation and delight of your readers?'

Bassett answered in the same ironic and bantering manner, 'Anything you like. Why don't you give me your views on the bomb, or modern art, or the world food shortage, or . . .'

To Bertie, this all seemed gibberish—initiated, he supposed, by Sammy with the intention of baiting Bassett; but if that were so, it did not seem to be succeeding: the journalist gave an impression of restrained enjoyment. Bertie looked to see if Julius shared the joke. He, however, held his head averted, as if entirely remote.

‘I would not talk about the bomb,’ Sammy was saying. ‘You journalists have destroyed its symbolic validity by your easy emotionalism. You . . .’

Bassett interrupted. ‘We give the public what it wants.’

He had again spoken lightly, almost self-mockingly, but the bookseller seized on his words.

‘Oh, no, Mr Bassett! Oh, no! You do yourself little justice.’ Sammy was now leaning forward, pointing with a forefinger, alert and commanding.

‘Of some journalists that might be true, but not of you, Mr Bassett. You are outstanding. I mean that sincerely; I am not deriding you. It is all very well for you to adopt that tone of cynical modesty among your professional colleagues. You give the public what it wants—yes. But you do it brilliantly, imaginatively, with such flair, such intuitive discernment that you know what it wants even before it knows itself. And, thus, you create its desires also.’

There was no more raillery in his voice. He still spoke softly, but with an eager urgency that alerted even Julius, forcing an opening in the thick wall of pain within which he had been darkly isolated, and from which he now emerged, stumbling, as he sought to regain his balance and to recognize once-familiar landmarks.

‘You mentioned the bomb. It must have been a journalist like yourself who first apprehended and capitalized your public’s unacknowledged wish for self-destruction, and shouted ‘Ban the Bomb’, as you, wearing the mask of purity, shout and rage against these other and more human manifestations of unacknowledged desires.’

The bookseller appeared to Julius as he had never seen him before, as if irradiated by a fierce and atrocious light. Indeed, the shaft of reflected sunlight now—with the bookseller, propped on his forearms, the upper half of his body over the desk—impaled his head.

'I expect that first journalist has killed himself by this time: he knew so much about the urge to self-destruction. As you know all about your public's envy and prurience, for it is your envy and prurience also. That is why you are so outstanding in your profession, Mr Bassett. You understand me, do you not? Because you derive your inspiration from denouncing all that in your heart and secretly you most fervently desire.'

The journalist opened his mouth as if to protest, but it seemed that his throat was constricted and the words would not form themselves.

'I asked you what your price was, Mr Bassett. Now I know it, and it was obtuse of me not to see it at the start, even if you do not know it yourself or are not prepared to acknowledge it to yourself.

'Shall I tell you? And tell you why you are still sitting here listening to me when . . .'—the bookseller made a gesture with his hand, not quite contemptuous—'Go on, drink up, man. When you could and should have been gone long ago.'

The journalist obediently emptied his glass.

'Because you are held by fascination. And your price? Not Veronica Barclay. Not myself. Or not Veronica Barclay alone, or myself alone, or any single one of us. Your price would be to be accepted by us all, to be allowed to participate in our activities—those activities which you denounce and would destroy and which you overwhelmingly desire.'

Samson seemed to relax a little then, to allow some of the spirit which had been driving him to drain away.

'So now I know your price, all that remains is to pay it. Is that not so?' He smiled ruefully. 'No, I know. It is not so simple. We could pay, but could you accept?'

It was finished, Bertie thought; it was finished, and Sammy had won. He had understood little of what had been taking place, but he was impressed by the bookseller's air of calm infallibility, in contrast with the journalist's huddled speechlessness. He exulted in the latter's defeat . . . as Bassett fumbled in his pocket to produce another cigarette.



'Could you really become one of us, one with us, Mr Bassett, however much you might wish to? How could you enter into our life, into our activities, any more than one can will oneself to enter into a dream, even if the dream seems more real than reality?'

Watching Bassett struggling to collect himself, to formulate and utter whatever words of repudiation he could contrive, Bertie felt no pity. How was he to know that, unwarned, unprepared, the journalist had that morning in the shabby office of a backstreet pornographer's come to the end of his resources, to the point beyond which, however far he might travel, all would be desert?

'No,' said Bassett. 'No, I will not.' His voice was high and despairing. He faced the bookseller open-mouthed, as if waiting for the words to come of their own accord.

'You're doomed anyway, Samson. You're finished.'

'Oh, yes,' said Sammy quietly, 'I know. For as you are the symbol of the public's, the world's envy and prurience, so are we the symbol of its dark and unacknowledged desires, and so we must be ultimately destroyed; because that which is and is not admitted must be explicitly denied; and our world no longer allows its scapegoats to run free into the wilderness.'

As an afterthought, he added, with his persistent humour: 'Criminal psychopath or not, I am under no illusions on that score. Even if you are not destined to be the agent of our disaster, the world will sooner or later find some other instrument with which to erase us.'

'Damn you. Damn you.'

Bassett was on his feet now, lunging—like a man in a building on fire who in his panic has forgotten his way to the exit. He stood over the desk, his arms flapping. He began to shout abuse. The bookseller rose to face him—rather, it seemed, as a courtesy than a reflex of alarm.

Everything then took place very quickly, in that illusion of timelessness and motionlessness (like a street accident) in which all that happens is recognized, assumes meaning only retrospectively.

Bertie, simple man of action, rose from his chair and went over to restrain the journalist. Perhaps one of

Bassett's flailing arms hit him first. There was a brief, confused scuffle, their heads meeting, and when they stood apart there was blood on the journalist's face.

It was all over, it seemed: Bassett breathing hard, trembling slightly, his arms now hanging loose at his sides, the smear of fresh blood vivid on his cheekbone.

Only at the last instant, too late, did he raise his hands in an inept attempt to ward off the blow as Julius struck, holding the bronze owl by the head, the heavy and sharp-cornered marble base splintering the bone.

He was already falling when the second blow descended, so that it struck the base of his skull glancingly, its major weight carried through to the angle of his neck and shoulder, hastening his forward fall.

She had not allowed him to stay with her.

'No, I'm all right. I'm quite all right now, darling. Truly. Sammy said he wanted you to go back.'

He had not persisted. He had turned away, leaving her at the open street door, and she had called him again. Her eyes were downcast, and there was a singular air of embarrassment about her.

'I didn't quite hear you.'

'I said: "You didn't mind, did you, darling?"' The words came with a rush. 'I mean, what I said.'

He had genuinely not understood her.

'I mean, what I said to that journalist. It was—most of all—for your sake.'

When he had reassured her, she had lifted her head, her cheeks still flushed, but a smile, sweet in its innocence and its trust, illuminating her face. He carried it away with him, imprinted on his inner mind.

And, sitting in the taxi-cab which had now entered the maze of narrow streets within which stood the bookshop, he saw in that irradiating smile the answer to the whispered question which (faithless, he reproached himself, faithless and dense!) had never quite been silenced ever since the day of his first meeting with her: the ghost of his wife's dedicated and malicious infidelity saying: how,

doing that which she does, free of her body, is she different from me?

And he knew that that ghost was now and for ever silent.

He paid the taxi-driver. He tried the handle of the shop door without thinking and was surprised that the door opened; then he remembered that he and Veronica had let themselves out. It was odd that Julius had not been sent to lock it behind them.

His mind was still filled by the memory of that loving and confiding smile; quite free of alarm, he felt only a detached curiosity concerning that which had been happening in the bookseller's inner sanctum since he had left it.

He saw the body first—straightened now and supine, as they had moved him, tended him. It dominated the room, as in a painting where the object in the middle of the canvas has been saturated with light, and the shapes and figures beyond that central effulgence are insubstantial and cursory.

There was only a little blood to be seen, welling out from beneath the head. The upward profile was broken; the cheekbone had disappeared; in its place a dark cavity was filled with a viscous pulp, which seemed to be moving, slowly bubbling, like a thick stew approaching boiling point. A darker trickle dripped from the nostrils.

'The door's not locked.' From the confused stridence of thoughts jangling in his head, Bateman selected the simplest for utterance.

The figures around the frame of the canvas moved and came to life. The bookseller took a step towards Bateman.

'He is not dead.' His tone was dry, prosaic.

'Not dead,' Bateman repeated.

He dropped on one knee. The wound, from close to, was less terrible than it had appeared to him at first—or, rather, he could see it now in its true proportions, his first instinctive apprehension of fatality having been proved illusory. Bassett was breathing—peacefully, like a dreamless sleeper.

'A doctor,' said Bateman, looking up.

'Not yet.' The bookseller appeared brisk, composed, calmly resolute. 'It is not necessary. I have a certain amount of medical knowledge.'

'You can't leave him lying here.' Bateman was scrambling to his feet. 'He's badly hurt.'

'He will soon recover consciousness. Eventually, he will require treatment in hospital.'

The bookseller's composure, contrasting with his own sense of shock, outraged Bateman. He was prepared to shatter it with violent words, but, facing Sammy, he saw then that the self-control overlaid a fundamental excitement, vibrant like an electrical charge.

'How . . .' he began. 'Who . . .' But he broke off.

He looked for the first time at the others. Bertie, slumped in a chair, his arms on his knees, seemed lost in dismay. Julius was leaning against the wall, but not in the manner of one in need of support. His face was very pale, blue-shadowed, but his eyes—which had returned now from Bateman to the unconscious body on the floor—were keen and his expression was sharply animated. A few isolated drops of blood shone melodramatically against the white of his shirt.

On the desk—this, too, Bateman saw for the first time—were two bowls of water, one discoloured and containing bloody swabs.

The bookseller turned. 'Go and lock the door then, Julius.'

Julius obeyed instantly, but unthinkingly. He was no longer conscious of any pain in his jaw. All his perceptions seemed sharper, more concentrated. Aware of everything that was taking place around him, he was yet indifferent to it, concerned—concerned beyond mere rewards and penalties—with the miraculous flowering of his spirit.

Having fastened the street door, he waited a moment, looking outside. Nothing was any different from as he had always known it; only his apprehension of it had worked a transformation, as if he had taken one of those drugs which vivify colours and sounds, reveal proportion and perspective in amorphous confusion.

He had at last left his island of isolation, the blow which

had shattered the face of the journalist having shattered also the imprisoning memory of that other, feeblener blow and the image of the ogre step-father, which had for so long dragged at his feet, constricted his heart. Wielding the bronze owl, he had had the desire and the intention to kill, and only chance had thwarted him; on that previous occasion the desire had been stronger, but a fatal cowardice had emasculated his intent, bequeathing a shame which had endured until this day.

Now the grimy window, against which his hands were pressed, the anonymous passers-by, the motor-cars and bicycles, the fiery sunlight on the patched and crumbling brickwork and the equally vital blocks of shadow . . . all was assimilated within himself, as he himself was incorporate with the purtenance of the entire physical world.

When he re-entered the room, Sammy was telling Bateman what had happened. Julius observed Bassett's glasses which had fallen, unbroken, beside a chair; he picked them up and laid them gently on the desk.

'Oh, yes, it was unfortunate—I mean, not only for poor Bassett: he was on the point of surrender. The case has altered now. We shall have to start all over again, and I am afraid it will not be easy. I mean, Bateman, it will not be easy now to extricate ourselves, to save us from the consequences of this.' He stretched his hand towards the floor.

Upon these last words, Bertie raised his head, staring dull-eyed from the bookseller to Bateman. Of them all, probably he alone had experienced the reactions which would generally be considered 'normal': a compound of guilt and fear and horror and an overwhelming sense of disaster.

There came a distant groan from the body on the floor. No one had picked up the bronze owl, blood-smeared like a living bird of prey, which lay beside Bassett's legs.

'We shall be able to talk to him in a few minutes. Before then I need some advice from you, Bateman, professional advice.'

'There's no getting away with this,' Bateman said. 'Even if Bassett himself . . .' He stopped, uncertain of what he intended to say. 'I mean, there are probably a dozen

people who knew he was coming here, and anyway there's one man who knows he left him here, who might even now be on his way back, looking for him. Besides that, there's . . .'

He broke off again, struck by the expression on the bookseller's face—an expression almost of gratification, as if he were pleased to have a dilettante theory confirmed by an acknowledged expert.

'But you know that, don't you?' Bateman said furiously. 'Why the hell ask me? You know all that. You know we can't get away with it.'

'That is not quite what I wished to ask you.'

The bookseller was smiling faintly, although the set of his jaw was grim. Looking at him, Bertie felt for the first time a touch of hope, a revival of his old trust in Sammy's infallibility and omnipotence.

From the body there came another insensate sound, less a groan this time than a liquid gurgle in the throat; there was also the sketchy proposition of a movement.

'Are you sure he's . . .'

The bookseller leant over Bassett. With his spatulate yet delicate thumbs, he raised his eyelids, and then moistened a cloth from the clean bowl of water on the desk to wipe his mouth and nostrils. The fingers of the injured man's right hand curled into his palm.

'Can you hear me, Bassett?'

There was no response.

'I believe he is semi-conscious now. He will have recovered consciousness entirely very soon.' The bookseller stood up. 'Come into the studio for a moment. You too, please, Bertie.'

He faced Bateman and Bertie in the dim and ghostless studio.

'Please give me your attention. What has happened cannot be undone, and it will have to be paid for. All we can do now is attempt to keep that payment as low as possible.' He had never been more impressive, never so effortlessly dominating. Quietly and dispassionately as he spoke, there was in his voice and bearing a force which could have led a vast multitude to triumph or to self-destruction.

'I blame nobody for what has happened; it was my own fault if anybody's, for I had deliberately created the situation and I should have foreseen all which might develop from it. Now we must find a compromise: there is nothing inglorious or humiliating in that, for life itself—if one chooses so to regard it—is a compromise with disaster.'

Relaxing slightly, he went on: 'On this occasion when I talk to Bassett there must be no interruption—no interruption, no contradiction. It will not take long, but we have not sufficient time for histrionics or for self-indulgence; and this is our last chance. Do you understand me?'

He took their silence for assent, and addressed himself then to Bertie: 'Have you your motor-car with you?'

Bertie explained that he had had to leave it parked a little distance away.

The bookseller told him to bring it to the shop, and Bertie departed submissively. Action was a relief, diminishing the impact of the disaster. As he stepped outside, the events of the past half-hour began to assume in his mind a fictional character, as if they were merely an extension of the studio masquerades in which he had acquitted himself so nobly. Moreover, in the last resort he found it impossible to believe in the reality of any threat or danger while Sammy, who had always so convincingly and imperturbably defeated danger, continued to dominate their destinies.

He observed that there was now parking space outside the shop. His motor-car would bear them all to safety!

'I shall need your help, Bateman, in what I am going to do now.' The bookseller had locked the door after Bertie. In the studio again, he was not pleading: his words contained the dignity of his inner assurance.

'But first I want you to confirm a point of law for me. Am I right in supposing that, in English law, once a man has been charged with an offence, the circumstances relating to that offence are *sub judice*?'

Bateman nodded.

'No newspaper would be able to divulge the background of the case?' Sammy persisted. 'Only that which was said in open court could be reported?'

Bateman nodded again. 'The courts have been very sensitive about that lately.'

'Especially—for we are not talking in the abstract—a newspaper which is itself involved, in the person of one of its staff?'

'Not until the case is over, of course,' Bateman said. 'The restrictions no longer apply then.'

'Ah, yes,' said Sammy. 'I intend to deal with that aspect.' He walked closer to Bateman. 'Have you your official notebook with you?' He was smiling—almost mischievously, like someone playing a good-natured trick on a child. He held out his hands, palms downwards, the two thumbs touching.

'Caution me.'

'What?' said Bateman.

'That is the procedure, is it not? I wish to make a statement—a confession.'

Bertie and Julius entered the studio within seconds of each other: Bertie first.

'The car's outside,' he said.

He apologized then for interrupting, because Bateman appeared to be writing in a notebook at Sammy's dictation.

Julius came in from the office.

'He's come round. I've put him in a chair.' He stared at the bookseller, his eyes brilliant, as if he had just divined the secret of the universe.

'Does he seem rational?'

'He asked for a drink.'

'Give him a glass of water.'

Sammy turned back to Bateman. 'That will have to be all then; the other details will have to wait. I think you have enough there. Should I not sign it?'

'No,' Bateman cried. He was not answering the bookseller's question. 'No. You can't do it. Let Julius take the consequences.' He became aware that he was sweating heavily and he wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. 'With your form . . .'



Sammy held out his hand. 'Give me the book.'

'With your form . . .'

'With my form, as you put it, what is a matter of mere ass . . .'

'Assault!' Bateman shouted, outraged. 'Malicious wounding, at least. Even, not impossibly, attempted murder, if they want to throw the book at you. You know what you'll get? Five years. Seven. And if they can they'll deport . . .'

The bookseller had taken the book from him, even as he was protesting. He read what had been written there and signed his name firmly at the foot of it, before returning the notebook to Bateman.

'And now to deal with Mr Bassett.'

'Does it hurt you, Bassett? Are you frightened? I have only patched you up. You should be in hospital. You might even die if you do not get the treatment you require quickly.'

The bookseller leant nearer, his face within inches of that of the journalist. Bassett, his head resting on the back of the chair, held a pad to his wound. He had not put on his glasses and he seemed unable to focus his vision. Except for the dabbing movements of the hand holding the smeared pad, he had remained quite motionless beneath the lash of the bookseller's insistent, hypnotic exposition.

'If we leave you here you will be found eventually, of course. But by then it may be too late.' Sammy spoke quietly, intimately, as if they were alone in the room, although the three others had taken up their former positions against the walls.

'Too late for you, I mean. But I do not want to threaten you. I do not believe it is even necessary to threaten you. As I told you, I only want you to give me your word. You know what I want of you, Bassett, you know that in the end you will have to accede. Why not spare yourself? You need to rest. When we have finished our business I will give you some tablets which will reduce the pain.'

You will be able to sleep. Only, you must agree and you must give me your word.'

'I . . . I know it wasn't you who . . .' They were the first words he had uttered. As with his eyes, he seemed unable to control his organs of speech: his voice was tremulous and discordant, suddenly like a very old man's.

'But I have told you: I have signed an admission. I am already under arrest.' The bookseller addressed the wounded man with a precise tenacity, as if instructing a recalcitrant child. 'All that remains—merely for the sake of appearances, of tidiness—is for you to make a corroborating statement, and to give me your word.'

'I don't understand.' It was clear that although he had now admitted to speech he was prevaricating, evading, as a child will—or a very old man.

'I will explain again.' Sammy's tone was still indefatigably patient. 'This is how it is to happen. I shall be charged, convicted and sentenced—a simple process, with the aid of your statement, as I shall not defend myself, but one which, because of the archaic ritual involved, will take some little time. During that time you will, of course, be precluded from writing about this affair. Now, you are to give me your word that even when you are legally free to comment you will abstain. There is to be no mention in your newspaper or anywhere else of the activities which led you here, no sensational disclosures . . .' (Bassett had closed his eyes, as if by so doing he could silence the persistent voice of his tormentor) 'and above all, no mention of anyone else whom you may believe to be involved.'

Sammy paused momentarily. The journalist, his eyes still closed, had begun to rock his head from side to side.

'Listen to me, Bassett. I, too, have not much time. The bookshop, the studio will be closed. All that has happened will have become history, and journalists and their readers are not interested in history.' Sammy's voice took on a sharper edge. 'You are not going unavenged, Bassett. It is proper there should be a scapegoat. I shall pay; and you know that it is I who am your true enemy. You will have won.' Again he paused, as if considering how most effectively to penetrate the other's mask of incomprehension.

Bassett opened his eyes. A look of childish (or senile) cunning appeared around his mouth. 'But how do you know, even if I give you my word, I'll . . .'

'You will keep it, Bassett. It will be too late for you to do otherwise even if you wished to. I told you I did not want to threaten you, but I promise that if you were to deceive me I would destroy you—even from my prison cell.'

Bassett had closed his eyes again. The bookseller laid a hand on his knee.

'Open your eyes, Bassett. Listen to me. There are many ways in which I could destroy you. Do I have to itemize them? You are old and nearly done. You know that I am stronger than you. Do I have to itemize them?

'I would remind you that your very presence here could be open to misinterpretation . . . so there is blackmail, for instance. I would perhaps not be able to prove it, but even to suggest it, would destroy you, for you have not the strength left to fight.

'You were defeated before you were struck down. Do you not believe that now even a child could corrupt and hopelessly compromise you? If, for instance, the offer which you just contrived to resist when it was made to you before were to be repeated now, do you think you have any more the pride which . . .'

Bassett moved his lips, but no words came.

'What did you say, Bassett? What did you say?'

His lips moved again. 'Why? Why are you doing this?'

The bookseller leaned back. It was the only gesture he permitted to underscore his victory.

'As to my motives, they do not concern you. You will give me your word and you will make that statement now.' It was not a question.

'Why?' Bassett said again. 'Why did you hit me? I shall have to explain why . . .'

The bookseller turned towards Bateman, indicating that he should come forward.

'You will give me your word?'

'Yes,' said Bassett. 'Why—what shall I tell them?'

'Say, if you like,'—it was a flash of the old Sammy—

'that we found ourselves in spiritual conflict.' With something of the same playful air, he picked up the bronze owl and waved it before him, gently, meditatively.

'My finger-prints,' he said. 'Just in case. It is by such meticulous attention to detail that the best deceptions are carried through to successful conclusions.'

Having at last understood, Bertie had uttered a sincere but feeble protest, which the bookseller had rejected with reassuring firmness. In any event, he began to tell himself, his personal degree of culpability was small; because the bookseller's sacrifice seemed to be primarily for the sake of Julius, he was able to accept it without violation of his unsophisticated sense of honour.

Bertie's confidence was enhanced because it was almost entirely to him—Julius still appearing trancelike in his detachment—that Sammy delivered his final instructions. The three of them were in the studio, having left Bateman alone with Bassett.

'The police will come here,' the bookseller said. 'There are certain things it is desirable that they should not find. You will have to remove them in your car.'

'It's lucky I got the car.' Bertie felt it to be his personal contribution to their present enterprise, a source of pride equivalent to his prodigies in connection with their former ritualistic activities.

It was to Bertie also that the bookseller handed the considerable sum of money which he had removed from the safe.

'It may be an unnecessary precaution, but you and Julius should go away for a while. I want to keep everything simple, uncomplicated. Bateman will let you know when you can both come back, if you want to come back.'

Something of the reality of their situation broke through upon Bertie's consciousness again then, as if he had been roused from a fearful dream—which he had all the same known to be a dream—to an awakening and an actuality yet more fearful. He looked wildly around the studio

At that instant, Bateman entered from the office. He was holding his notebook in his hand.

'Have you finished?' asked the bookseller.

Bateman did not reply. He walked up close to Sammy, warily almost, as if he were approaching a declared enemy.

'You can't do it. You mustn't do it,' he said.

'Bateman, we have no time.'

Bateman called Julius's name. 'You can't let him do it.'

'You don't understand.' Reluctantly stirred from his rapt indifference, Julius replied in a tone which was slightly pitying—but not contemptuous in its former fashion. 'It is not only for my sake.'

'Yes,' said the bookseller. 'Partly for your sake, Julius, partly for that of Bertie, partly for all of you—for Louise and Veronica and for you too, Bateman—because the entire and unvarnished truth would destroy all of you. And partly,' he added quietly, almost apologetically, 'for my own sake also. Come. Be quick.' He looked at his wristwatch. 'We have not much time. Bassett's assistant will be back soon.'

'But . . .' Bateman began.

'We have no time. Has he signed it?'

'Yes,' said Bateman.

'Have you given him the tablets?'

'Yes.'

'Good. That is all then.'

He had laid his hand on Bertie's shoulder and was leading him away, repeating his last orders.

'You know then what to do. I rely on you to look after Julius until it is over.' He was speaking as if to his trusted adjutant, the man upon whom he could rely above all others.

Bertie wanted to say goodbye to Bateman, but it would have seemed incongruous to have called out a conventional farewell and he lacked the words for the true situation.

Sammy was holding out his hand. Looking into his face, Bertie was amazed, even perhaps horrified, to see him as he had always known him, his expression calm and sedate, a smile effortless and un-rueful on his mouth.

'Good luck.' Sammy released Bertie's hand and then made a little formal bow. 'Now and in the future. And, Bertie . . . thank you.'

He sent him on his way with another clap upon his shoulder.

Julius was still standing, unconcerned, against the wall of the studio.

'Well, Julius, are you ready?'

'I don't tell you I'm sorry, do I?' said Julius. 'I don't tell you I'm sorry and I don't thank you either.' His words might have sounded challenging, but he knew that the bookseller would not interpret them in that way. 'And I don't ask you why you're doing it.'

If it were love that he felt for Sammy it was a pared down love, refined to an impersonal purity.

'For me it's all over now,' he said. Sammy would understand what he meant. 'I'm on my way.'

'You will do what I have told you to do?'

'You don't have to worry.'

'It would be a pity if . . .'

'You don't have to worry.'

The new universe into which he had so recently moved was still strange to him in its beauty and its singularity. Perhaps there was no place in it for Sammy. It was this spontaneous reflection which almost un-manned Julius, so that he came up to the bookseller holding his hands open in front of him, and accepted then, but dry-eyed, the older man's embrace; and they held each other briefly.

'Goodbye, Julius. Do not reproach yourself, now or in the future. I am doing only that which I have to do.'

Julius looked into his eyes for an instant and then turned away, through the red curtains. The bookseller and Bateman were left alone in the studio.

'Would you lock the shop door? When Bassett's young man comes back we want to be ready for him.'

Bertie and Julius had already driven away. So far as Bateman could observe, no one in the street was taking any special interest in the bookshop. When he returned to the studio, the bookseller was sorting some papers.

'Bassett is all right. He is sleeping,' he said. Indicating

the papers, he continued, almost shyly: 'One likes to leave things in order; it helps to foster the illusion that one knows what one is doing. I forgot to ensure that the shop door was locked after you had left with Veronica; anyone could have come in. Even more reprehensibly, I forgot for a while that poor Bassett had instructed his young man to return here, so that he could have entered unannounced at any moment.' His hands were still busy with the files and papers. 'What does your detective's training make of that, Bateman?'

'It's common,' Bateman said. His mind was wandering. 'They nearly always forget something.'

'They!'

'I mean, any sort of a criminal after . . .'

Sammy laughed. 'The unconscious guilty urge for discovery and punishment. I, too, have read my criminal psychology. But you have forgotten already: the guilt was not mine. And if that young man had walked in we should not have been able to carry through our deception.' He put the papers down in a neat pile. 'What does one make of that? An unconscious urge to establish my innocence, do you suppose?'

'It's not too late.'

Sammy ignored him. 'But one is warned by such errors. Have we remembered everything?'

'It's not too late,' Bateman said again. A thought had come to him while he had been alone with the journalist. 'If you've got Bassett so broken, why must you go through with this?'

'He is broken, yes,' the bookseller replied. 'I did not even need to threaten him. My threats were in a way a superfluous kindness: they will help him to live with his own defeat, his own decline. But,' he went on, 'it is not Bassett alone who is involved now; too many other people must learn about it: there is his assistant, to begin with; then all the other important people on his newspaper. It could not be kept quiet.' He smiled at Bateman. 'Are you not convinced by these material, these circumstantial details? Well, then, as I told him, it is proper that there should be a scapegoat.'

'It is not too late,' Bateman repeated unthinkingly. 'They'll catch Julius, of course, but . . . Samson! Samson, don't sacrifice yourself for an ideal.' He surprised himself with this final exhortation.

'You should not insult me.' The bookseller's tone was decisive. 'Only a fool sacrifices himself for a cause—for an ideal or an idea. But to gratify a personal obsession . . . that's another matter. Have we remembered everything?' Sammy was looking about the room, as if seeking something concrete, tangible. 'Is everything in order?'

He turned to Bateman with that smile of humility which offset and charmed away his arrogance. 'I have not made a mistake, have I? If the police have me wrapped up as I am wrapped up in your notebook, they will not probe more deeply? They will let the other business drop? I would not, for instance, want Louise to be . . .'

'No, it's you they were after. They'll be glad enough to get you. It's nice and tidy now from their point of view.' There was a bitterness, a personal bitterness, in Bateman's voice. 'If Bassett can control his young man and the shop and the studio are closed . . . Anyway, it's only the distributor they prosecute as a rule . . . Besides, I can hold up the other investigation until . . .'

Had the bookseller heard him?

'And Veronica? You will look after her.'

'Yes,' said Bateman, 'I will look after her.'

'Well, we have done all we can then. We have not forgotten anything.' He wore the air of achievement, of—so it seemed suddenly to Bateman—an intolerable complacency.

As Bateman groped for comprehension, there came a heavy knocking on the shop door.

'I expect that is Bassett's young man. Are we ready?'

He was still smiling, moving towards the heavy red curtains.

'Samson, wait!' It was Bateman's final throw. 'Vanity, that's all. The last vanity. All this, all you're doing is only . . .'

Then the bookseller laughed outright. 'It is all a matter of words. Call it vanity, if you like. All action is that, in a



sense—if you like the word—all heroism, all martyrdom. Come. Are you ready?

He paused before the curtains. 'Yes,' he added reflectively, 'sacrifice perhaps most of all: the acting out of one's vanity, the dream of glory. Are you ready, Bateman?'

The knocking on the door was repeated. The bookseller pulled aside the curtains. He was no longer smiling. He looked once again around the studio; there was, as there had not been before, a suggestion of regret in his bearing. He straightened himself: it was as if the studio—with its mirrors, its screens and plywood props, all the equivocal apparatus of illusion—were now peopled, and it was a consolation for him to believe that he had helped to save them all. Though the bookseller seemed in his self-deluding pretensions ultimately absurd and pathetic, Bateman recognized then that there was a strong element of the redeemer in him.

Bateman guided Samson through the curtains and the empty shop. He unlocked the door. It was he, too, who admitted Hobbs.

'You will find Bassett in the office. Go through. He is all right. Everything is in order.'

He led the bookseller into the street, holding him firmly by the arm.

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